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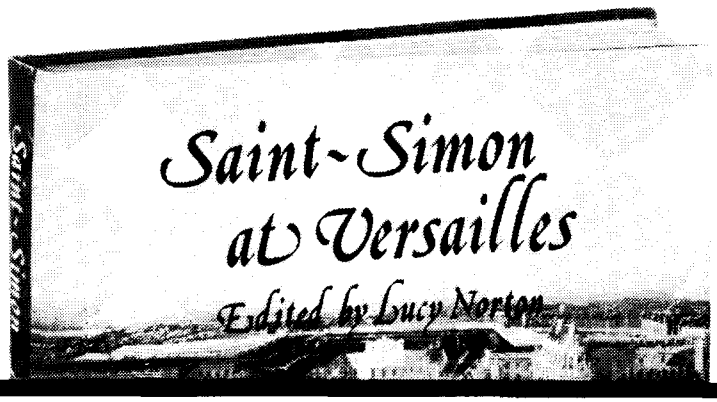

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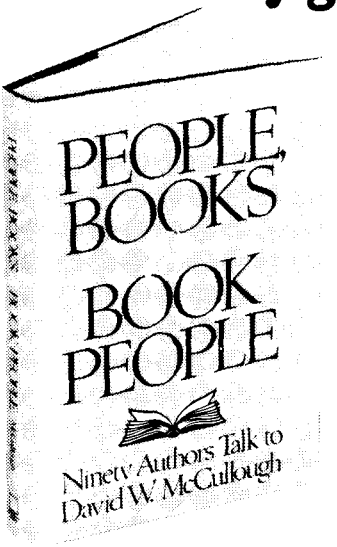

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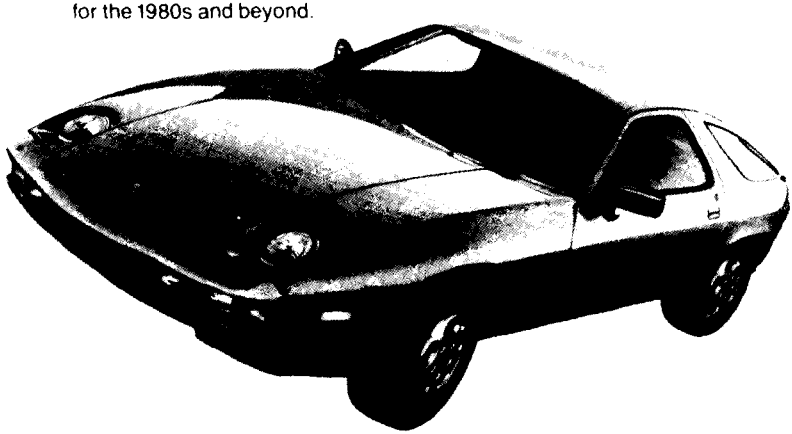

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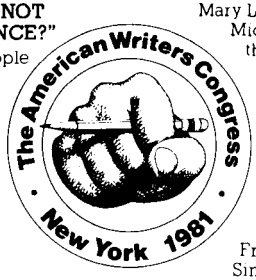

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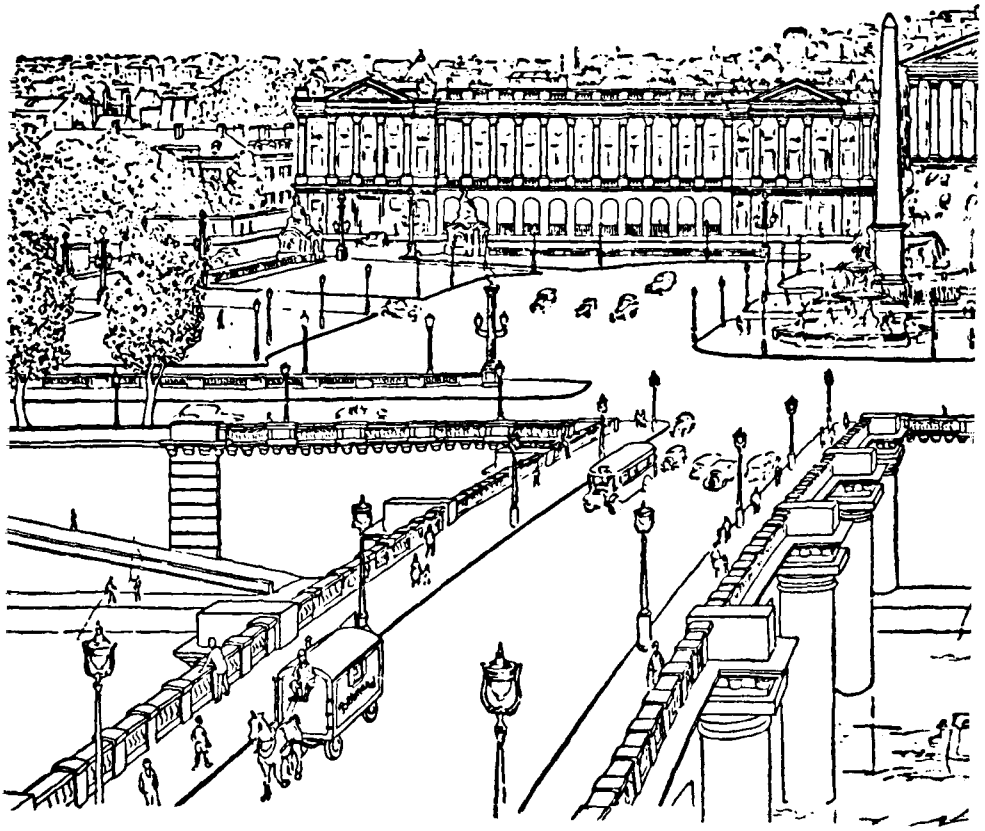

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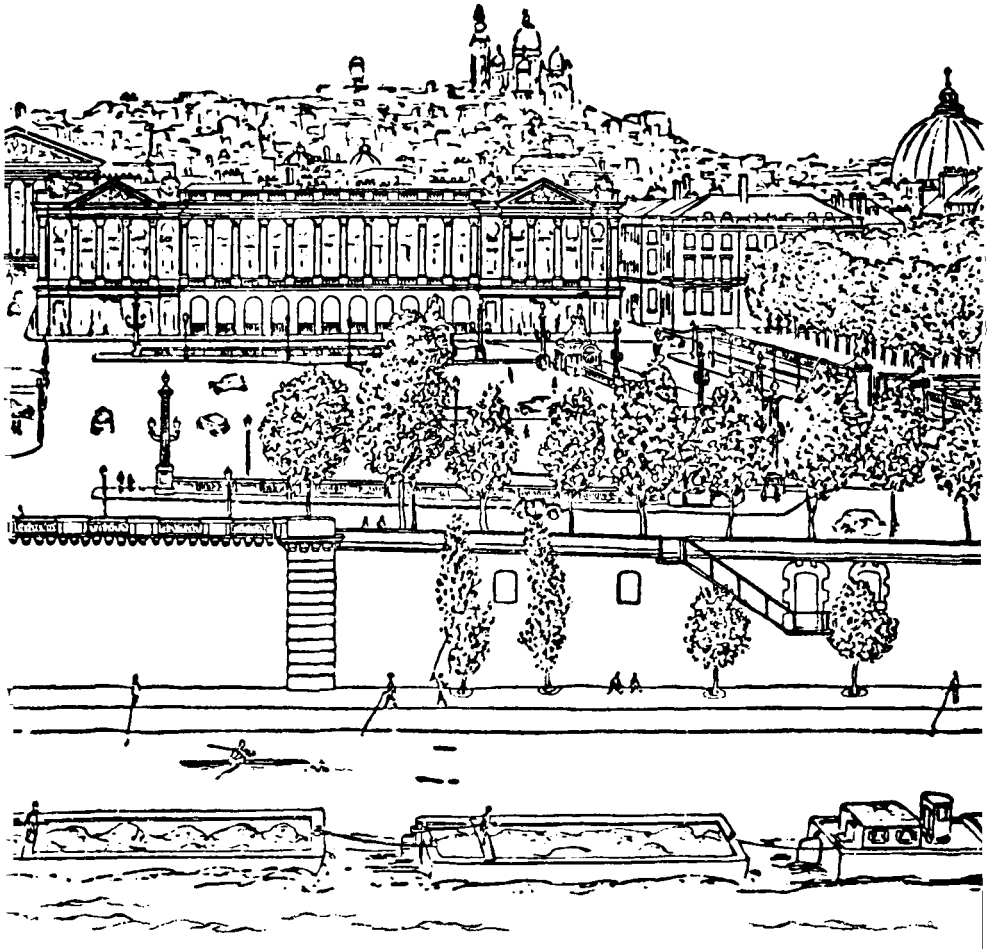

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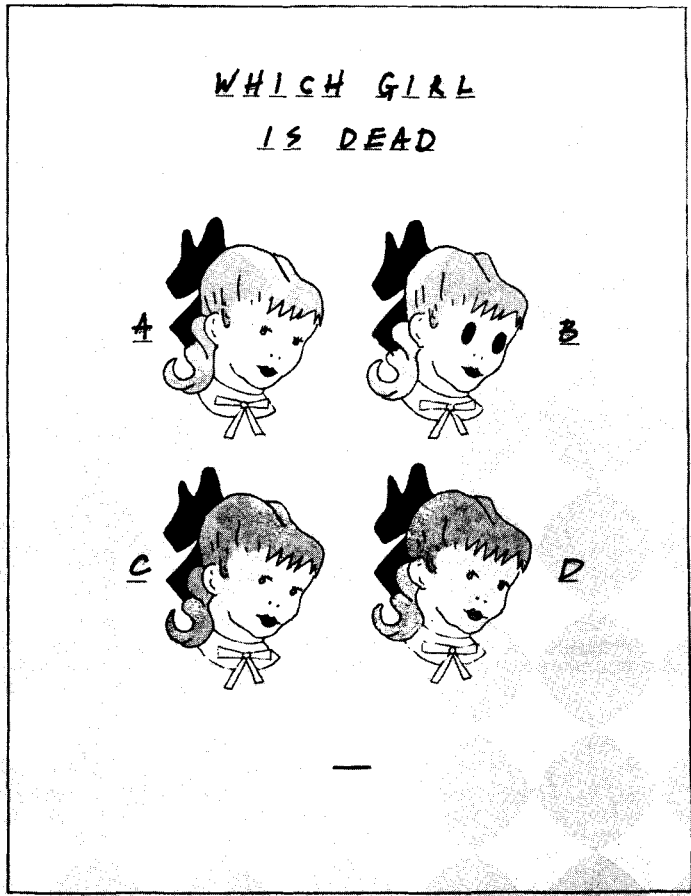

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THE BERNARD F. CONNERS POETRY PRIZE

The Paris Review is pleased to announce that for his poem "The War of Vaslav Nijinsky," Frank Bidart is the first winner of the Bernard F. Conners Poetry Prize—one thousand dollars donated annually by the former publisher of *The Paris Review* (1976–78) for a poem of over 300 lines.

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The Kléber Avenue Communion

Hans Koning

I am tortured by a strange nostalgia, there are images in my mind from the first World War, of English soldiers, little fellows under their saucer helmets marching down village streets, with French children crying, "Tommy, Tommy!" The soldiers died before I was born. Lieutenants on leave from the front drove to Paris in those marvelous open automobiles they built then. I don't know how I can long for a share in lives which never even touched mine. I long for it with acute pain.

I am thinking about time, time spans, links within time between lives. About the intensity of an officer of twenty driving down a Paris boulevard in an open car, in the summer of 1917. In spite or maybe even because of the seed of death in his every thought. The resonance of that intensity is still in the air around us. I assume so, anyway. Nothing mystical about this: there are human links. The old man sitting on that bench at the Rond-Point des Champs Elysées saw the automobile with the lieutenant go by. He now sees me go by. Here is a link already. Who knows but that I look like the lieutenant. Who

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knows but that the old man remembers few things in his whole eighty years' existence as clearly as a summer afternoon when as a boy he was promenading along the Champs Elysées, in a confused eagerness for the coming autumn when he'd be drafted too (and yet dreading it), glancing at girls and women but miserably ignored by them. He'd give tugs at his suit with its stupid sleeves which were too short. That automobile slowly passed him. The English officer's eyes rested on the boy for one moment, the arrogant, almost colorless blue eyes of a demigod, at his side on the front seat a young woman in a big white hat, the car, black and nickel, a Hispano-Suiza (the boy collected the pins and badges which car manufacturers gave out). How he had felt he was touching a world of unimaginable glory and joy. How he had assuaged his burning jealousy with the idea that the officer might not have another week to live. He had been ashamed of that thought, superstitiously perhaps (it might rebound on himself), and had followed it by muttering a paternoster for the lieutenant.

Had the officer nevertheless really died within the week? He or another one like him, how is one to know the difference? Many of those dead were not recognizable, they were literally shredded by the German Minnies. The old man is sitting there, he survived, indeed he still looks hale. Perhaps he got posted to an *échelon* in that deadly winter of '17 because at his army medical, no matter how hasty they were, they still couldn't miss the tuberculosis he had like so many city children then. Presently, though, he will be dead too. Then the sixty years he has had extra over the lieutenant will be but nothing. But I, who received that sunny 1917 afternoon through his memory, will keep it by writing it down. I walk on toward Etoile and turn left on Avenue Kléber. I sit down at a café table and tear a page out of my notebook.

Kléber. The names of streets, squares, and subway stations of Paris make a web of blood and battles. Nothing seems to have mattered as much to them as those fifteen years of Napoleonic victories and each street sign is a grave marker. Just as on your first visit to London you're made to walk through your

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high school reading, Pepys, Dickens's pub, that kind of thing, in Paris you walk through the blood of Europe. It makes me grateful for the numbered streets of New York.

Kléber was the general left behind to run Egypt after Napoleon had rushed back from there to France to pursue his grander schemes. I read about this man, Kléber, in the dark main reading room of the Bibliothèque Nationale on Rue Richelieu—that was before they put the neon in; when daylight fell hesitantly through the glass dome on our tables—he was as cruel and whimsical as any general, although commanding an army of that Revolution which, in the words of Saint-Just, had invented the very idea of human happiness. One evening a student from the University of Cairo sneaked into the palace gardens where Kléber was walking and stabbed him. Kléber fell. He looked up at the Cairo sky which at dusk withdraws into space with dizzying speed, and died. The student's name was Suleiman Alepin. The year, 1800, was to the French the year Eight of the new era in the history of mankind, but all the same they had Alepin's right hand burned off and then had him impaled on a wooden stake, on which it took him three days to die. The executioner knew how to steer the wood past the crucial places in the body.

The thought of Alepin comes back to me erratically ever since I learned of him in the Bibliothèque Nationale. I have tried to think out a link, but in vain. Not because of the width of the time gap. I know a woman whose great-aunt had seen Napoleon. The time gap is bridged. There is no link because Alepin's death is beyond my comprehension. The idea that but for a different turn of the wheel of fate I could have been born to feel a pointed stake enter my bowels is not only nauseating, it is not really understandable. But why should it have been understandable to Alepin? Why do I deserve this dispensation? Alepin's deed is not beyond my comprehension at all, indeed not. I have done his deed, I have stepped into that cool shady garden from the dusty Cairo square on which it abuts, I've felt the relief of thus ending a day of feverish thoughts of martyrdom, thoughts I had toyed with as one toys with a sore tooth. I

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stand in the path of the general, and looking at his stomach bulging under the white and gold waistcoat, looking at the streaks of sweat running from his hat into his preposterous, heavy woollen collar, seeing him not-see me, the native, it is easy to forget his humanness and to stab my dagger into that uncomfortable flesh. But thereafter I can think thoughts only of daring escapes or of a speech about liberty in front of embarrassed judges. I cannot think of my right hand burning away, my guts pierced by wood.

Cairo has no Alepin Street. Jean-Baptiste Kléber has one of the nicest avenues of Paris, though, and one of the widest. There are so many rows of cars parked on it, triple and quadruple, that they look as if they had been abandoned by a fleeing population, as in that science fiction movie where Charlton Heston was the last survivor in some big city. I know that across from my café terrace the old Hotel Majestic stands, where the Vietnam peace negotiations were held, but because of all the cars I can only see rows of blind windows high up. On the other corner, catty-corner from the empty Majestic, sits another grand hotel, which is still a hotel. They're actually renovating it: through the gap of a crosswalk, men are visible, going in with cement and planks. That hotel is called La Pérouse and I lived there once, which is explained by the fact that they used to rent out the former servants' rooms on the top floor quite cheaply by the week or the month. I had one of those rooms and considered myself better off in it than if I'd had a suite on one of the real hotel floors, for I could climb out onto a strip of flat roof from my room and take sunbaths, out of sight from the street. Another general, Charles de Gaulle, used the La Pérouse for his stays in Paris during those years of his between office, in the fifties, when he seemed to have retired for good. In retrospect, I'd have liked to share an elevator ride with him. My mother was in a Paris elevator with Maurice Chevalier in 1930 and always remembered. That must have been in another hotel, of course. The La Pérouse was, and presumably is, very un-show businessy.

However, I have a better La Pérouse link than a ride with

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de Gaulle. In that same period, 1930, 1931, when my mother eyed Chevalier (or maybe even the other way around; she was a beautiful woman then), the La Pérouse employed an Italian night clerk whose name was Lauro de Bosis. De Bosis's other profession was poet. His poetry was antifascist and he had had to flee from Mussolini's police. He was embarked on a secret project of his own for which he was saving money by night clerking. He can't have been earning much—imagine what a hotel would pay a night clerk in those days, a foreigner without papers. Still, life in Paris was very cheap. Perhaps they had given him one of those servants' rooms, perhaps the very same room I rented thirty years later. I once asked the hotel manager about him. The manager looked an old man to me, but he was offended and answered, "1930? You must be joking." *(Vous plaisantez.)* But say that de Bosis had had my room, that room I remember so clearly (those mansard rooms were all very much alike anyway), about filled with just the bed and a big breakfront, an armoire (indeed as big as an armory) with a heavy door which always slowly creaked open again, no matter how hard you jammed it shut with pieces of newspaper as wedges. De Bosis would have slept during the day of course, getting up and out into the street at three in the afternoon or so. A nice hour. There must have been more air then, smells of the seasons, a gentler kind of city noise, in those days when only the rich in France had cars.

You could say that de Bosis was a gentle, non-violent, twentieth century Alepin. Too gentle. In the early fall of 1931 when he had saved enough money, he quit his hotel job and took the train to the south of France. A photograph from his Rome days shows him an elegant young man, and in a good suit saved from that time he now took up the role of English playboy. It was in that role that he appeared at a flying school near Marseilles and started taking lessons. Soon they let him fly solo.

One morning early in October, after only five hours of flying time, de Bosis took off and instead of going around and around over the Côte he flew a straight course for Rome. With him in the plane he had a kitbag with several thousand leaflets, in

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which he called on Italians to write chain letters against Mussolini in preparation for a general uprising against the dictator. Thus, shortly after twelve noon of that day, in hazy sunshine, the people of Rome saw a little sports plane fly low over the rooftops scattering leaflets. At that hour any Roman with the price of a coffee in his pocket must have been sitting in a bodega or on a terrace, but the streets must have been crowded too, with shoppers, messengers, street sweepers, the thousands of unemployed hanging around at fountains and corners, and of course the louts in the various uniforms (designed by the Duce) whose walk and eyes showed they owned the streets. The cloud of leaflets descended on all these and then past them onto the pavement. At first they must have seemed one more fascist propaganda gimmick and then, suddenly, the militia must have started running around and collecting those messages where they lay or fell from the timid hands of the Romans. No chain letters were started, no uprising was prepared, not a word appeared in the Italian press. We know of de Bosis and his plane ride because, on his way to the Marseilles airfield, he had mailed a letter to a friend with a description of his plan and with one of the leaflets. He had been sitting up all night in his hotel room writing the letter and had headed it, with painful romanticism, "The story of my death." The *New York Times* printed it some days later, on October 14, 1931.

His plane, which would have been well-nigh empty of gas, turned west after dropping the last leaflets and headed out over the Mediterranean. Later there was a story that an Italian fighter plane had been sighted in pursuit. Nothing further is known; de Bosis was never seen again. His project and his death reemerged in fiction when the French writer Roger Martin du Gard used it in his series of novels, *Les Thibaults*. Martin du Gard turned de Bosis into a Frenchman, Jacques Thibault, and the flight, equally hopeless and useless, now took place over the Franco-German frontline in August 1914 with leaflets calling on all workers to lay down their arms. Thus those novels, which were famous in France, did not help to make de Bosis less forgotten. Indeed, Martin du Gard's widow didn't know there

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was a real-life precedent for Jacques Thibault's flight (I wrote and asked her).

Given the battle record of the Italian air force, I would guess that, even with a fighter plane in pursuit, de Bosis landed unharmed on the sea when he ran out of gasoline. It was a calm day according to the weather reports, he may have stayed afloat for quite a while. Why didn't life emulate the movies more successfully and why couldn't he have been picked up by a Hollywood movie producer's yacht, or just by a Greek tramp steamer? He wasn't. He must have drowned. More important perhaps, did he until his last conscious moment live happily or at least in peace with what he had done? Is it possible in the agony of drowning to still see oneself as a poetic hero living out an idea? Was Lauro de Bosis that strong (that naïve, that romantic), that while conscious he had no regrets, no sense of futility?

How easy I find it to imagine him (myself), once the engine has died, sitting in the open cockpit or maybe on the wing, in the sudden silence, the soft wind on my face, a blue, a peaceful setting if it were not for that dark seed of death hidden in the slow subsidence of my little plane, fatal though an inch a minute. I want to understand de Bosis and understand him now, not when I will be dying myself and when it will be too late; I want to know if there is a terrible bitterness to be tasted of ultimate regret, of not knowing "how it will end." Then again I imagine he is to be envied.

I safely assume that de Bosis had spent many hours in that same Bibliothèque Nationale of mine. Where else would a young man go whose life was so strongly bound up with literature and who had not a franc to waste? And mustn't he, once his plan had matured, have been tempted to read of others like him in the past, of Gavrilo Princip perhaps, the high school student who shot and killed Archduke Francis Ferdinand in Sarajevo in June 1914, of the anarchists who died in Italy in the twenties after bungled attempts on Mussolini, and probably even of Suleiman Alepin—since that library is so full of Napoleon and of Napoleon in Egypt? De Bosis sits in that

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gloomy reading room and is not deterred by all those deaths. Frightened, yes—he doesn't see a girl across his table who vaguely smiles at him and he just frowns back—but not deterred. He is not going to kill the dictator, he is going to have him overthrown by the men and women of his country.

The plane goes under, the nose with the engine first. De Bosis had long taken off the leather flight jacket and his boots. The water isn't cold; he can hope to stay alive for another hour or more. But then I realize he neither struggled nor even hoped, or he wouldn't have written at the top of that last letter of his, "The story of my death." He must have known how it would be. A poet has that much insight, and I think he dropped the letter in the Marseilles mailbox with a strange satisfaction, with a feeling of *joining*. I'm not quite sure I know what I mean with that. Nothing political, assuredly, nothing daily or petty. Death, tiredness. I remember now that one night, unable to sleep, lying on the La Pérouse bed in (say) de Bosis's old room, I thought he was simply tired at the end.

Here on my Avenue Kléber café terrace, with all those pretty cars, with a view of the Arc de Triomphe in the distance lit by the low sun, I am in a communion of tiredness. I imagine that this city and this world have been tired ever since the Great War. The lieutenant on leave in the Hispano-Suiza was not tired; even the Tommies in the muddy streets of northern France weren't tired. Now there is nothing further to be expected here, nothing good, nothing bad. But while alive I must still continue looking in people's faces, looking at the sky, touching a woman's body, thinking, tasting, in short enjoying my brief advantage over Alepin, over de Bosis, and over the lieutenant, which is the nearest thing to being them.

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Frank Bidart

The War of Vaslav Nijinsky

Still gripped by the illusion of an horizon;
overcome with the finality of a broken tooth;
suspecting that habits are the only salvation,

—the Nineteenth Century's
guilt, *World War One*,

was danced

by Nijinsky on January 19, 1919.

• • •

. . . I am now reading *Ecce Homo*. Nietzsche
is *angry* with me—;

he hates "the Crucified One."

But he did not live through War—;
when the whole world painted its face

with blood.

Someone must expiate the blood.

• • •

No. Let what is past
be forgotten. Let even the blood

be forgotten—; there *can be no* "expiation."

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Expiation is not necessary.

Suffering has made me what I am,—

I must not regret; or judge; or
struggle to escape it

in the indifference of (the ruthless
ecstasy of)
CHANGE; "my endless RENEWAL"; BECOMING.

—That is Nietzsche.

He wants to say "*Yes*" to life.

I am not Nietzsche. I am the bride of Christ.

• • •

He was planning a new and original ballet. It was to be a picture of sex life, with the scene laid in a *maison tolérée*. The chief character was to be the owner—once a beautiful *cocotte*, now aged and paralyzed as a result of her debauchery; but, though her body is a wreck, her spirit is indomitable in the traffic of love. She deals with all the wares of love, selling girls to boys, youth to age, woman to woman, man to man.

When he danced it, he succeeded in transmitting the whole scale of sex life.

• • •

—Many times Diaghilev wanted me
to make love to him

as if he were
a woman—;

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I did. I *refuse* to
regret it.
At first, I felt humiliated for him,—

he saw this. He got angry
and said, "I enjoy it!"

Then, more calmly, he said,

"Vatza, we must not *regret* what we *feel.*"

—I REGRETTED

what I FELT . . . Not

making love, but that since the beginning
I wanted to *leave* him . . .
That I stayed

out of "GRATITUDE,"—
and *FEAR OF LIFE*,—
and
AMBITION. . .

That in my soul,
I did *not* love him.

Now my wife wants to have
a second child. I am frightened;

the things a human being must learn,—
the things a child

must *learn* he FEELS,—

frighten me! I know people's faults

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because in my soul,
I HAVE COMMITTED THEM.

The man who chops wood for us
was speaking, this morning, in the kitchen,

to my wife. As I passed in the hallway
I heard

whispering—; and LISTENED . . .

He said that as a child
in his village at Sils Maria

he worked for the writer, *Nietzsche*—;
he felt he must tell her

that just before the "famous man"
was taken away, INSANE,

he acted and looked

AS I DO NOW.

I can choose "*life*" for myself;—

but must I, again, again,
AGAIN,—
for *any other* creature?

• • •

The Durcals arrived in St. Moritz, and were invited to tea. Asked what he had been doing lately, Vaslav put on a worldly air, leaned back on the sofa and said,

"Well, I composed two ballets, I prepared a new program for the next Paris season, and lately—I have played a part. You

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see, I am an artist; I have no troupe now, so I miss the stage. I thought it would be rather an interesting experiment to see how well I could act, and so for six weeks I played the part of a lunatic; and the whole village, my family, and even the physicians apparently believed it. I have a male nurse to watch me, in the disguise of a *masseur.*''

Romola was overcome, torn between anger and relief. She was confirmed in her supposition that her fears had been groundless when the male nurse came, after ten days, to assure her from his long experience that her husband was completely sane.

• • •

—Let me explain to you
what ''*guilt*'' is . . .

When I joke with my wife, and say,
''I think I will go back to Russia
and live as a peasant—''

she jokes back, and says,
''Do as you like! I will
divorce you, and marry
a manufacturer . . .''

She looks at me, and I look at her.

What is terrible

is that I am serious—; and *she* is serious . . .

She is right, of course,—
I do *not* have the right

to make her live differently, without servants,
rich friends, elegant clothes—
without her good and sane *habits*;

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do not have the right even to try
to *re-make* her . . .

But does *she* then have the right
to make *me* live like this, JUDGED, surrounded by
those who cannot understand or *feel* me,—
like a
manufacturer? . . .

She is angry, as I am angry.

We both are *right*—; and both angry . . .

Soon, she feels guilty, feels that she
has failed me—;
and I too
feel guilty . . .

The *GUILT* comes from *NOWHERE.*

Neither of us has done wrong!

But I am a good actor—and reassure her
that I love her; am indeed happy; and that
nothing will change . . .

I *want* to be a *good husband.*

Still, I am guilty.

. . . Why am I guilty?

My life is *FALSE.*

• • •

I know the psychology of lunatics;
if you don't contradict them, they like you.

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But I am not insane.

My brother was insane. He died
in a lunatic asylum.

The reason I *know* I am *NOT* insane
is because, unlike my brother,

I *feel guilt.*

The insane do not feel guilt.

My brother was a dancer. He was older than I,
but still in the *corps* when I became
a soloist. He was ashamed, and jealous;

he went insane.

When the doctors questioned him, he showed
astonishing courage,—
he thought that everyone
in the company was paid

by the secret police, to gather
evidence against our family . . .

He displayed cunning, and stoic
fortitude, under the questions.

Even when he thought he faced death,
he lied
to protect my mother.

When he was taken away,
she cried, and cried . . .
She cried
visiting him,—

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but that didn't make him feel GUILTY . . .

My wife thought because
I wore a large *cross* on my neck in the village,—

and told her certain dishes
served at our table were poisoned,—

I was insane.

But I ***knew*** that my actions
frightened her—; and I suffered.

Nietzsche was insane. He knew
we killed God.

. . . This is the ***end*** of the story:

though He was dead, God was clever
and strong. God struck back,—

AND KILLED US.

If I *act* insane, people will call me
"mad clown," and forgive
even the truth—;

the insane feel anxiety and horror,

but are RELEASED
from GUILT . . .

I only want to know
things I've learned like this,—

these things I cannot *NOT* know.

• • •

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His other ballet remained unfinished. It was his own life put into a choreographic poem: a youth seeking truth through life, first as a pupil, open to all artistic suggestions, to all the beauty that life and love can offer; then his love for the woman, his mate, who successfully carries him off.

He set it in the period of the High Renaissance. The youth is a painter; his Master one of the greatest artists of the period, part Genius and part Politician, just as Diaghilev seemed to him to be. This Master advances him, and defends his daring work from the attacks of colleagues, as long as he is a student; then he falls in love, and the Master bitterly rejects not only him but his work.

• • •

—Last night, once again, I nearly
abandoned my autobiographical ballet . . .

The plot has a good beginning
and middle,—
THE PUZZLE

is the end . . .

The *nights* I spend—

reading and improving
Nietzsche, analysing and then abandoning

my life, working on the *Great Questions*

like WAR and GUILT and GOD
and MADNESS,—

I rise from my books, my endless, fascinating
researches, notations, projects,

dazzled.
—Is this happiness? . . .

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I have invented a far more
accurate and specific notation for dance;

it has taken me two months
to write down the movement in my ten-minute

ballet, *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* . . .

There is a MORAL here

about how LONG you must live with
the consequences of a SHORT action,—

but I don't now feel
MORAL.
Soon I shall begin

Le Sacre du Printemps—; which
is longer . . .

I can understand the pleasures of War.

In War—
where *killing* is a virtue: *camouflage*
a virtue: *revenge* a virtue:
pity a weakness—
the world rediscovers

a *guiltless* PRE-HISTORY

"civilization" condemns . . .

In 1914, I was assured
the War would end in six weeks;

the Germans, in the summer, thought
they would enter Paris by the fall.

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But the War
was *NOT* an accident.

CUSTOM, and his Children,—

Glory. Honor. Privilege. Poverty.
Optimism. "The Balance of Power,"—

for four years

dug a large, long hole
(—a *TRENCH*—)
in the earth of Europe;

when they approached the hole
to pin medals

on the puppets
they had thrown there,

they slipped in BLOOD,—

. . . AND FELL IN.

Poverty and *Privilege*
alone survived,

of all the customs of the past . . .

—Should the World
regret the War? Should I

REGRET MY LIFE?

. . . Let our epitaph be:

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In Suffering, and Nightmare,
I woke at last

to my own nature.

• • •

One Sunday we decided to sleigh over to Maloja.

Kyra was glad and Vaslav was very joyful that morning.

It took us about three hours to get there; Kyra and I got very hungry during the long drive.

The road was extremely narrow during the winter, because it needed cleaning from the heavy snows, and in certain parts there was always a space to await the sleighs coming from the opposite direction.

Vaslav was as a rule a careful and excellent driver, but on this particular Sunday he did not wait, but simply *drove on into* the oncoming sleighs.

We were in danger of turning over; the horses got frightened.

The coachmen of the other sleighs cursed, but this did not make any difference.

Kyra screamed, and I begged Vaslav to be more careful, but the further we went the more fiercely he drove *against* the other sleighs.

I had to clutch on to Kyra and the sleigh to keep ourselves on.

I was furious, and said so to Vaslav.

He fixed me suddenly with a hard and metallic look which I had never seen before.

As we arrived at the Maloja Inn I ordered a meal.

We had to wait.

Vaslav asked for some bread and butter and macaroni.

"Ah, Tolstoy again," I thought, but did not say a word, and bit my lips.

Kyra was anxiously awaiting her steak, and as it was laid

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before her and she began to eat, Vaslav, with a quick gesture, snatched the plate away.

She began to cry from disappointment.

I exclaimed, "Now, Vaslav, please don't begin that Tolstoy nonsense again; you remember how weak you got by starving yourself on that vegetarian food. I can't stop you doing it, but I won't allow you to interfere with Kyra. The child must eat properly."

I went with Kyra to the other room to have our solitary lunch.

We drove home very quietly without a word.

• • •

—The second part of my ballet
Le Sacre du Printemps

is called "THE SACRIFICE."

A young girl, a virgin, is chosen
to die
so that the Spring will return,—

so that her Tribe (free
from "*pity*," "*introspection*," "*remorse*")

out of her blood
can renew itself.

The fact that the earth's renewal
requires human blood

is unquestioned; a mystery.

She is chosen, from the whirling, stamping
circle of her peers, purely by chance—;

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then, driven from the circle, surrounded
by the elders, by her peers, by animal
skulls impaled on pikes,

she dances,—

at first, in paroxysms
of Grief, and Fear:—

again and again, she leaps (—*NOT*

as a ballerina leaps, as if she
loved the air, as if
the air were her element—)

SHE LEAPS

BECAUSE SHE HATES THE GROUND.

But then, slowly, as others
join in, she finds that there is a self

WITHIN herself

that is *NOT* HERSELF

impelling her to accept,—and at last
to *LEAD*,—

THE DANCE

that is her own sacrifice . . .

—In the end, exhausted, she falls
to the ground . . .

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She dies; and her last breath
is the reawakened Earth's

orgasm,—
a little upward run on the flutes
mimicking

(—or perhaps MOCKING—)

the god's spilling
seed . . .

The Chosen Virgin
accepts her fate: without considering it,

she knows that her Tribe,—
the Earth itself,—
are UNREMORSEFUL

that the price of continuance
is her BLOOD:—

she *accepts* their guilt,—

. . . *THEIR GUILT*

THAT THEY DO NOT KNOW EXISTS.

She has become, to use
our term,
a *Saint.*

The dancer I chose for this role
detested it.

She would have preferred to do
a fandango, with a rose in her teeth . . .

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The training she and I shared,—

training in the traditional
"academic" dance,—

emphasizes the illusion
of *Effortlessness*,
Ease, *Smoothness*, *Equilibrium* . . .

When I look into my life,
these are not the qualities
I find there.

Diaghilev, almost alone
in the Diaghilev Ballet, UNDERSTOOD;

though he is not now, after my marriage
and "*betrayal*,"

INTERESTED in my choreographic ambitions . . .

Nevertheless, to fill a theatre,
he can be persuaded

to *hire* me as a dancer . . .

Last night I dreamt

I was slowly climbing
a long flight of steps.

Then I saw Diaghilev
and my wife

arm in arm
climbing the steps behind me . . .

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I began to hurry, so that
they would not see me.

Though I climbed
as fast as I could, the space

between us
NARROWED . . .

Soon, they were a few feet behind me,—
I could hear them laughing,

gossiping, discussing CONTRACTS
and LAWSUITS . . .

They understood each other perfectly.

I stopped.

But they

DIDN'T STOP . . .

They climbed right past me,—
laughing, chatting,

NOT SEEING ME AT ALL . . .

—I should have been happy;

yet . . .
wasn't.

I watched their backs,
as they happily

disappeared, climbing
up, out of my sight . . .

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• • •

Our days passed in continuous social activity.

Then one Thursday, the day when the governess and maid had their day off, I was making ready to take Kyra out for a walk when suddenly Vaslav came out of his room and looked at me very angrily.

"How dare you make such a noise? I can't work."

I looked up, surprised.

His face, his manner were strange; he had never spoken to me like this.

"I am sorry. I did not realize we were so loud."

Vaslav got hold of me then by my shoulders and shook me violently.

I clasped Kyra in my arms very close, then with one powerful movement Vaslav pushed me down the stairs.

I lost my balance, and fell with the child, who began to scream.

At the bottom, I got up, more astounded than terrified.

What was the matter with him?

He was still standing there menacingly.

I turned round, exclaiming, "You ought to be ashamed! You are behaving like a drunken *peasant.*"

A very changed Vaslav we found when we came home, docile and kind as ever.

I did not speak about the incident, either to him or to anybody else.

Then one day we went on an excursion and Vaslav again wore his cross over his sweater.

On our way home, he suddenly began to drive fiercely and the sleigh turned over.

Amazingly, no one was hurt.

I got really angry, and walked home with Kyra.

Of course, he was home ahead of us.

When I entered the house, the servant who worshipped Vaslav opened the door and said, "Madame, I think Monsieur Nijinsky is ill, or perhaps very drunk, for he acts so queerly. His voice is hoarse and his eyes all hazy. I am frightened."

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I went to our bedroom.

Vaslav lay fully dressed on the bed, with the cross on, his eyes closed.

He seemed to be asleep.

I turned cautiously towards the door, and then noticed that heavy tears were streaming down his face.

"Vatza, how are you feeling? Are you angry with me?"

"It is nothing; let me sleep; I am tired."

• • •

Each night now I pray,

Let this cup

pass from me! . . .

But it is not a cup. It is my life.

I have *LEARNED*

my *NATURE* . . .

I am insane,—
. . . or evil.

Today I walked out into the snow.

I said to myself:

THREE TIMES
YOU TRIED TO HARM YOUR WIFE AND CHILD.

I said:

LIE DOWN IN THE SNOW
AND DIE. YOU ARE EVIL.

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I lay down in the snow . . .

I tried to go to sleep.
My HANDS

began to get cold, to FREEZE.

I was lying there a long, long time.
I did not feel cold any more . . .

Then, God said to me:

GO HOME
AND TELL YOUR WIFE YOU ARE INSANE.

I said:

Thank you, thank you, God!
I am not evil. I am insane.

I got up. I wanted to go home,—
and tell this news

to my wife.

Then, I said to God:

I am insane,—
my wife will suffer. I am guilty.

Forgive me for being insane.

God said:

GOD MADE YOU. GOD DOES NOT CARE
IF YOU ARE "GUILTY" OR NOT.

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I said:

I CARE IF I AM GUILTY!

I CARE IF I AM GUILTY! . . .

God was silent.

Everything was SILENT.

I lay back down in the snow.

I wanted again to go to sleep, and die . . .

But my BODY did not want to die.
My BODY spoke to me:

There is no answer to your life.
You are insane; or evil.

There is only one thing that you can do:—

You must join YOUR GUILT

to the WORLD'S GUILT.

I said to myself:

I must join MY GUILT

to the WORLD'S GUILT.

I got up out of the snow.
. . . What did the words mean?

Then I realized what the words meant.

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I said to myself:

You must join YOUR GUILT

to the WORLD'S GUILT.

There is no answer to your life.
You are insane; or evil.

. . . Let this be the Body

through which the War has passed.

• • •

Nijinsky invited guests to a recital at the Suvretta House Hotel.

When the audience was seated, he picked up a chair, sat down on it, and stared at them. Half an hour passed. Then he took a few rolls of black and white velvet and made a big cross the length of the room. He stood at the head of it, his arms opened wide. He said: "Now, I will dance you the War, which you did not prevent and for which you are responsible." His dance reflected battle, horror, catastrophe, apocalypse. An observer wrote: "At the end, we were too much overwhelmed to applaud. We were looking at a corpse, and our silence was the silence that enfolds the dead."

There was a collection for the Red Cross. Tea was served. Nijinsky never again performed in public.

• • •

—The War is a *good* subject . . .

The audience, yesterday, liked
my dance.

The public does not understand *Art*;
it wants to be astonished.

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I know how to astonish.

The War allowed me
to project,—
to EMBODY,—

an ultimate "*aspect*" of the "*self*" . . .

A member of the audience told me
I had always been able

"to smell a good subject."

God, on the other hand,—

who at times
has responded to my predilection

for *ACTIONS*

that are *METAPHYSICAL EXPERIMENTS*,—

perhaps felt threatened, or even
coerced—;

he perhaps felt that though he could
agree with me

that expiation *IS* necessary,—

he had to agree with
Nietzsche

that expiation is *NOT* possible . . .

In any case, he has chosen,—as
so often,—
CAMOUFLAGE . . .

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Now that the War has been over
two months, at times I almost
doubt if it existed—;

in truth,
it never existed,—

. . . *BECAUSE IT HAS NEVER BEEN OVER.*

Twenty years ago, a boy of nine
was taken by his mother

to the Imperial School of Ballet,

to attempt to become a pupil;

the mother was poor, and
afraid of life; his father

had abandoned the family when the boy was four . . .

Even then, he had a good jump—;
he was admitted.

He had been taught by the priests
that because of Adam and Eve, all men were born
in *Original Sin*,—

that all men were,
BY NATURE, guilty . . .

In his soul, he didn't believe it.

He was a good boy. His mother loved him.

He believed
in his essential innocence,—

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he thought his nature
GOOD . . .

He worked hard. He grew thinner,—
and started

"dancing like God" . . .

Everyone talked about it.

But then,—
he LEARNED SOMETHING.

He learned that

All life exists

at the expense of other life . . .

When he began to succeed,
he saw that he was AMBITIOUS,—
JEALOUS
of the roles that others won . . .

—Then his brother
got sick . . .

THE ROCK
THAT GIVES SHADE TO ONE CREATURE,—

FOR ANOTHER CREATURE

JUST BLOCKS THE SUN.

. . . This is a problem of *BEING*.
I can imagine

no *SOLUTION* to this . . .

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At sixteen, he met a Prince. He loved the Prince,—
but after a time

the Prince grew tired of him . . .

Then he met a Count—;
whom he *didn't* love.

The Count gave him a piano . . .

He had heard of Diaghilev. Diaghilev
invited him
to the *Hotel Europe,*—

he went to seek his luck.

He found
his luck.

At once, he allowed Diaghilev
to make love to him.

Even then, he disliked Diaghilev
for his too self-assured voice . . .

He always had thought he was essentially
different from the people
in books of HISTORY,—

with their lives of *betrayals*; *blindness*;
greed; and *miseries* . . .

He saw, one day, that this illusion,—
this FAITH,—

had, imperceptibly,

vanished—;

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he was *NOT* different—;

he did not understand *WHY* he did
what he did, nor were his instincts

"GOOD" . . .

Then, I said to myself:

"HISTORY *IS* HUMAN NATURE—;

TO SAY *I AM GUILTY*
IS TO ACCEPT IMPLICATION

IN THE HUMAN RACE . . ."

—Now, for months and months,
I have found

ANOTHER MAN in me—;

HE is *NOT* me—; *I*

am afraid of him . . .

He hates my wife and child,—
and hates Diaghilev;

because he thinks GOODNESS and BEING
are incompatible,—

. . . *HE WANTS TO DESTROY THE WORLD.*

DESTROY it,—
or REDEEM it.

Are they the *same*? . . .

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As a child, I was taught, by the priests,
to crave the Last Judgment:—

when the *Earth* will become a *Stage*,—

and WHAT IS RIGHT and WHAT IS WRONG

will at last show *clear*, and *distinct*,
and *separate*,—

and then,—

THE SLATE IS WIPED CLEAN. . .

—Even now, I can see the World
wheeling on its axis . . . I

shout at it:—

CEASE. CHANGE,—
OR CEASE.

The World says right back:—

I must chop down the Tree of Life
to make coffins . . .

Tomorrow, I will go to Zurich—
to live in an asylum.

MY SOUL IS SICK,—
NOT MY MIND.

I *am* incurable . . . I did not
live long.

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Death came
unexpectedly,—
for I wanted it to come.

Romola. Diaghilev.

. . . I HAVE EATEN THE WORLD.

My life is the expiation for my life.

Nietzsche understood me.

When *he* was sick,—when his *SOUL*
was sick,—
he wrote that he would have

much preferred to be a *Professor* at Basel

than *God*—;
but that he did not dare to carry

his egotism
so far as to neglect the Creation of the World.

• • •

In 1923, Diaghilev came to see him. Vaslav by now got out of bed in a strange fashion. First of all he went on all-fours; then crawled around the room; and only then stood upright. In a general way, he seemed attracted by the floor, to feel a need to be as low down as possible (his bed was almost on a level with the floor) and to grab hold of something. As he walked he leaned forward and felt at his ease only when lying down.

This was the first time Diaghilev had set eyes on him since they had parted in wrath in Barcelona six years before. "Vatza, you are being lazy. Come, I need you. You must dance again for the Russian Ballet and for me."

Vaslav shook his head. "I cannot because I am mad."

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• • •

Frightened to eat with a new set of teeth;
exhausted by the courage the insane have shown;
uncertain whether to REDEEM or to DESTROY THE EARTH,

—the Nineteenth Century's
guilt, *World War One*,

was danced

by Nijinsky on January 19, 1919.

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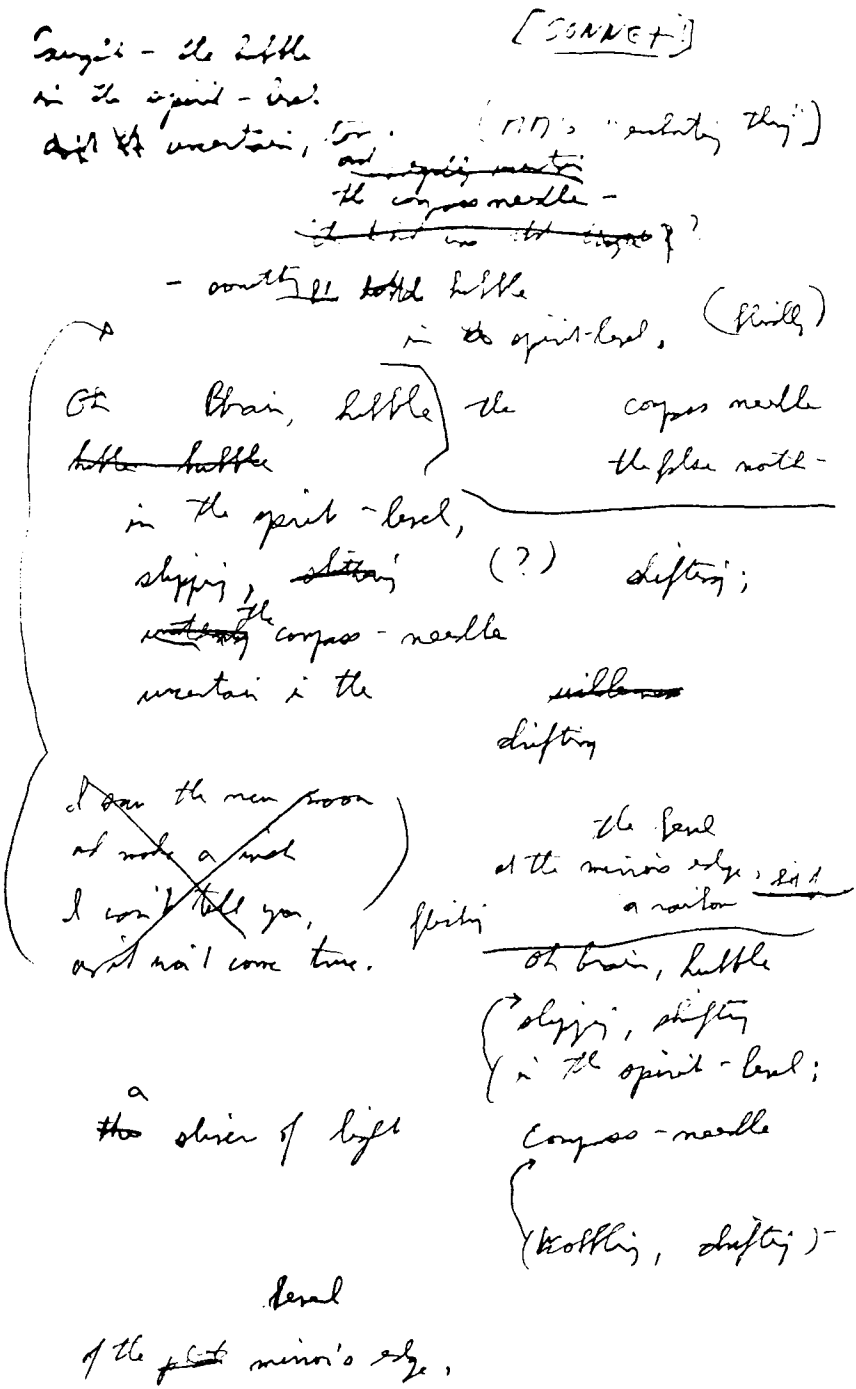

A manuscript page from Elizabeth Bishop's "Sonnet", published in 1979.

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The Art of Poetry XXVII
Elizabeth Bishop

The interview took place at Lewis Wharf, Boston, on the afternoon of June 28th, 1978, three days before Miss Bishop and two friends were to leave for North Haven, a Maine island in Penobscot Bay where she summered. Her living room, on the fourth floor of Lewis Wharf, had a spectacular view of Boston Harbor; when I arrived, she immediately took me out on the balcony to point out such Boston landmarks as Old North Church in the distance, mentioning that "Old Ironsides" was moored nearby.

Her living room was spacious and attractive, with wide-planked polished floors, a beamed ceiling, two old brick walls,

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and one wall of books. Besides some comfortable modern furniture, the room included a jacaranda rocker and other old pieces from Brazil, two paintings by Loren MacIver, a giant horse conch from Key West, and a Franklin stove with firewood in a donkey pannier, also from Brazil. The most conspicuous piece was a large carved figurehead of an unknown beast, open-mouthed, with horns and blue eyes, which hung on one wall below the ceiling.

Her study, a smaller room down the hall, was in a state of disorder. Literary magazines, books and papers were piled everywhere. Photographs of Marianne Moore, Robert Lowell, and other friends hung on the walls; one of Dom Pedro, the last emperor of Brazil, she especially liked to show to her Brazilian visitors. "Most have no idea who he is," she said. "This is after he abdicated and shortly before he died—he looked very sad." Her desk was tucked in a far corner by the only window, also with a north view of the harbor.

At 67, Miss Bishop was easily and accurately described by the word "striking," her short, swept-back white hair setting off an unforgettably noble face. She was wearing a black tunic shirt, gold watch and earrings, grey slacks, and flat brown Japanese sandals which made her appear shorter than her actual height: five feet, four inches. Although she looked well and was in high spirits, she complained of having had a recent hay fever attack and declined to have her photograph taken with the wry comment that, "photographers, insurance salesmen, and funeral directors are the worst forms of life."

Seven or eight months later, after reading a profile I had written for The Vassar Quarterly *(which had been based on this interview) and worrying that she sounded like "the soul of frivolity," she wrote me: "I once admired an interview with Fred Astaire in which he refused to discuss 'the dance,' his partners, or his 'career' and stuck determinedly to* golf*—so I hope that some readers will realize I do think about ART once in a while even if babbling along like a very shallow brook. . . "*

Note: Though Miss Bishop did have the opportunity of correcting those portions of this interview incorporated in the Vassar Quarterly *article, she never saw it in this form.*

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INTERVIEWER

Your living room seems to be a wonderful combination of the old and new. Is there a story behind any of the pieces, especially that figurehead? It's quite imposing.

BISHOP

I lived in an extremely modern house in Brazil. It was very beautiful and when I finally moved I brought back things I liked best. So it's just a kind of mixture. I really like modern things but while I was there I acquired so many other things I couldn't bear to give them up. This figurehead is from the São Francisco River. Some are more beautiful; this is a very ugly one.

INTERVIEWER

Is it supposed to ward off evil spirits?

BISHOP

Yes, I think so. They were used for about fifty years on one section, two or three hundred miles, of the river. It's nothing compared to the Amazon but it's the next biggest river in Brazil. This figurehead is primitive folk art. I think I even know who made it. There was a black man who carved twenty or thirty and it's exactly his style. Some of them are made of much more beautiful wood. There's a famous one called "The Red Horse" made of jacaranda. It's beautiful, a great thing like this one, a horse with its mouth open, but for some reason they all just disappeared. I made a week-long trip on that river in 1967 and didn't see one. The riverboat, a sternwheeler, had been built in 1880—something for the Mississippi, and you can't believe how tiny it was. We splashed along slowly for days and days . . . a very funny trip.

INTERVIEWER

Did you spend so much of your life traveling because you were looking for a perfect place?

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BISHOP

No, I don't think so. I really haven't traveled that much. It just happened that although I wasn't rich I had a very small income from my father, who died when I was eight months old, and it was enough when I got out of college to go places on. And I traveled extremely cheaply. I could get along in Brazil for some years but now I couldn't possibly live on it. But the biographical sketch in the first anthology I was in said, "Oh, she's been to Morocco, Spain, etc.," and this has been repeated for years even though I haven't been back to any of these places. But I never traveled the way students travel now. Compared to my students, who seem to go to Nepal every Easter vacation, I haven't been anywhere at all.

INTERVIEWER

Well, it always sounds as if you're very adventurous.

BISHOP

I want to do the Upper Amazon. Maybe I will. You start from Peru and go down—

INTERVIEWER

Do you write when you're actually traveling?

BISHOP

Yes, sometimes. It depends. I usually take notes but not always. And I keep a kind of diary. The two trips I've made that I liked best were the Amazon trip and one to the Galapagos Islands three or four years ago . . . I'd like very much to go back to Italy again because I haven't seen nearly enough of it. And Sicily. Venice is wonderful. Florence is rather strenuous, I think. I was last there in '64 with my Brazilian friend. We rented a car and did northern Italy for five or six weeks. We didn't go to Rome. I *must* go back. There are so many things I haven't seen yet. I like painting probably better than I like poetry. And I haven't been back to Paris for years. I don't like the prices!

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INTERVIEWER

You mentioned earlier that you're leaving for North Haven in several days. Will this be a "working vacation"?

BISHOP

This summer I want to do a lot of work because I really haven't done anything for ages and there are a couple of things I'd like to finish before I die. Two or three poems and two long stories. Maybe three. I sometimes feel that I shouldn't keep going back to this place that I found just by chance through an ad in the Harvard *Crimson*. I should probably go to see some more art, cathedrals, and so on. But I'm so crazy about it that I keep going back. You can see the water, a great expanse of water and fields from the house. Islands are beautiful. Some of them come right up, granite, and then dark firs. North Haven isn't like that exactly but it's very beautiful. The island is sparsely inhabited and a lot of the people who have homes there are fearfully rich. Probably if it weren't for these people the island would be deserted the way a great many Maine islands are because the village is very tiny. But the inhabitants almost all work—they're lobstermen but they work as caretakers. . . . The electricity there is rather sketchy. Two summers ago it was one hour on, one hour off. There I was with *two* electric typewriters and I couldn't keep working. There was a cartoon in the grocery store—it's eighteen miles from the mainland—a man in a hardware store saying, "I want an extension cord eighteen miles long!" Last year they did plug into the mainland—they put in cables. But once in a while the power still goes off.

INTERVIEWER

So you compose on the typewriter?

BISHOP

I can write prose on a typewriter. Not poetry. Nobody can read my writing so I write letters on it. And I've finally trained myself so I can write prose on it and then correct a great deal. But for poetry I use a pen. About halfway through sometimes

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I'll type out a few lines to see how they look.

William Carlos Williams wrote entirely on the typewriter. Robert Lowell printed—he never learned to write. He printed everything.

INTERVIEWER

You've never been as prolific as many of your contemporaries. Do you start a lot of poems and finish very few?

BISHOP

Yes. Alas, yes. I begin lots of things and then I give up on them. The last few years I haven't written as much because of teaching. I'm hoping that now that I'm free and have a Guggenheim I'll do a lot more.

INTERVIEWER

How long did it take you to finish "The Moose"?

BISHOP

That was funny. I started that *years* ago—twenty years ago, at least—I had a stack of notes, the first two or three stanzas, and the last.

INTERVIEWER

It's such a dreamy poem. It seems to move the way a bus moves.

BISHOP

It was all true. The bus trip took place before I went to Brazil. I went up to visit my aunt. Actually, I was on the wrong bus. I went to the right place but it wasn't the express I was supposed to get. It went roundabout and it was all exactly the way I described it except that I say "seven relatives." Well, they weren't really relatives, they were various stepsons and so on, but that's the only thing that isn't quite true. I wanted to finish it because I liked it but I could never seem to get the middle part, to get from one place to the other. And then when I was still living in Cambridge I was asked to give the Phi Beta Kappa poem at

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Harvard. I was rather pleased and I remembered that I had another unfinished poem. It's about whales and it was written a long time ago, too. I'm afraid I'll never publish it because it looks as if I were just trying to be up-to-date now that whales are a "cause."

INTERVIEWER

But it's finished now?

BISHOP

I think I could finish it very easily. I'm going to take it to Maine with me. I think I'll date it or nobody will believe I started it so long ago. At the time, though, I couldn't find the one about whales—this was in '73 or '74, I think—so I dug out "The Moose" and thought, "Maybe I can finish it," and I did. The day of the ceremony for Phi Beta Kappa (which I'd never made in college) we were all sitting on the platform at Sanders Theater. And the man who had asked me to give the poem leaned across the president and said to me whispering, "What is the name of your poem?" I said, " 'The Moose,' M-o-o-s-e," and he got up and introduced me and said, "Miss Bishop will now read a poem called, 'The *Moos*'." Well, I choked and my hat was too big. And later the newspaper account read, "Miss Bishop read a poem called 'The Moose' and the tassle of her mortarboard swung back and forth over her face like a windshield wiper."!

The Glee Club was behind us and they sang rather badly, I thought, everybody thought. A friend of mine who couldn't come to this occasion but worked in one of the Harvard houses and knew some of the boys in the Glee Club asked one of them when they came back in their red jackets, "Well, how was it?" He said, "Oh, it was all right but we didn't sing well"—which was true—and then he said, "A woman read a poem." My friend said, "How was it?" And he said, "Well, as poems go, it wasn't bad."!

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever had any poems that were gifts? Poems that

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seemed to write themselves?

BISHOP

Oh yes. Once in awhile it happens. I wanted to write a villanelle all my life but I never could. I'd start them but for some reason I never could finish them. And one day I couldn't believe it—it was like writing a letter.* There was one rhyme I couldn't get that ended in e-n-t and a friend of mine, the poet Frank Bidart, came to see me and I said, "Frank, give me a rhyme." He gave me a word offhand and I put it in. But neither he nor I can remember which word it was. But that kind of thing doesn't happen very often. Maybe some poets always write that way. I don't know.

INTERVIEWER

Didn't you used to give Marianne Moore rhymes?

BISHOP

Yes, when she was doing the La Fontaine translations. She'd call me up and read me something when I was in New York—I was in Brazil most of that time—and say she needed a rhyme. She said that she admired rhymes and meters very much. It was hard to tell whether she was pulling your leg or not sometimes. She was Celtic enough to be somewhat mysterious about these things.

INTERVIEWER

Critics often talk about your more recent poems being less formal, more "open," so to speak. They point out that *Geography III* has more of "you" in it, a wider emotional range. Do you agree with these perceptions?

BISHOP

This is what critics say. I've never written the things I'd like to write that I've admired all my life. Maybe one never does. Critics say the most incredible things!

**The poem is "One Art," in* Geography III.

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INTERVIEWER

I've been reading a critical book about you that Anne Stevenson wrote. She said that in your poems nature was neutral.

BISHOP

Yes, I remember the word "neutral." I wasn't quite sure what she meant by that.

INTERVIEWER

I thought she might have meant that if nature is neutral there isn't any guiding spirit or force.

BISHOP

Somebody famous—I can't think who it was—somebody extremely famous was asked if he had one question to ask the Sphinx and get an answer, what would it be? And he said, "Is nature for us or against us?" Well, I've never really thought about it one way or the other. I like the country, the seashore especially, and if I could drive, I'd probably be living in the country. Unfortunately, I've never learned to drive. I bought two cars. At least. I had an MG I adored for some years in Brazil. We lived on top of a mountain peak, and it took an hour to get somewhere where I could practice. And nobody really had time to take an afternoon off and give me driving lessons. So I never got my license. And I *never* would have driven in Rio, anyway. But if you can't drive, you can't live in the country.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have the painting here that your uncle did? The one "about the size of an old-style dollar bill" that you wrote about in "Poem"?

BISHOP

Oh, sure. Do you want to see it? It's not good enough to hang. Actually he was my great-uncle. I never met him.

INTERVIEWER

The cows in this really are just one or two brushstrokes!

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BISHOP

I exaggerated a little bit. There's a detail in the poem that isn't in the painting. I can't remember what it is now. My uncle did another painting when he was fourteen or fifteen years old that I wrote about in an early poem ["Large Bad Picture"]. An aunt who lived in Montreal had both of these and they used to hang in her front hall. I was dying to get them and I went there once and tried to buy them but she wouldn't sell them to me. She was rather stingy. She died some years ago. I don't know who has the large one now.

INTERVIEWER

When you were showing me your study, I noticed a shadow-box hanging in the hall. Is it by Joseph Cornell?

BISHOP

No, I did that one. That's one of my little works. It's about infant mortality in Brazil. It's called *anjinhos*, which means "little angels." That's what they call the babies and small children who die.

INTERVIEWER

What's the significance of the various objects?

BISHOP

I found the child's sandal on a beach wading east of Rio one Christmas and I finally decided to do something with it. The pacifier was bright red rubber. They sell them in big bottles and jars in drugstores in Brazil. I decided it couldn't be red so I dyed it black with India ink. A nephew of my Brazilian friend, a very smart young man, came to call while I was doing this. He brought two American rock and roll musicians and we talked and talked and talked and I never thought to explain in all the time they were there what I was doing. When they left, I thought, "My God, they must think I'm a witch or something!"

INTERVIEWER

What about the little bowls and skillets filled with rice?

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BISHOP

Oh, they're just things children would be playing with. And of course rice and black beans are what Brazilians eat every day.

Cornell is superb. I first saw the "Medici Slot Machine" when I was in college. Oh, I loved it. To think one could have *bought* some of those things then. He was very strange. He got crushes on opera singers and ballet dancers. When I looked at his show in New York two years ago I nearly fainted because one of my favorite books is a book he liked and used. It's a little book by an English scientist who wrote for children about soap bubbles [*Soap Bubbles; their colours and the forces which mold them,* by Sir C.V. Boys, 1889].

His sister began writing me after she read Octavio Paz's poem for Cornell that I translated. (She doesn't read Spanish.) She sent me a German-French grammar that apparently he meant to do something with and never did. A lot of the pages were folded over and they're all made into star patterns with red ink around them. . . . He lived in what was called Elysian Park. That's an awfully strange address to have.

INTERVIEWER

Until recently, you were one of the few American poets who didn't make their living teaching or giving readings. What made you decide to start doing both?

BISHOP

I never wanted to teach in my life. I finally did because I wanted to leave Brazil and I needed the money. Since 1970 I've just been *swamped* with people sending me poems. They start to when they know you're in the country. I used to get them in Brazil but not so much. They got lost in the mail quite often. I don't believe in teaching poetry at all but that's what they want one to do. You see so many poems every week you just lose all sense of judgment.

As for readings, I gave a reading in 1947 at Wellesley College two months after my first book appeared. And I was *sick* for days ahead of time. Oh, it was absurd. And then I did one in Washington in '49 and I was sick again and nobody could hear

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me. And then I didn't give any for 26 years. I don't mind reading now. I've gotten over my shyness a little bit. I think teaching helps. I've noticed that teachers aren't shy. They're rather aggressive. They get to be, finally.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever take a writing course as a student?

BISHOP

When I went to Vassar I took 16th century, 17th century, and 18th century literature, and then a course in the novel. The kind of courses where you have to do a lot of reading. I don't think I believe in writing courses at all. There weren't any when I was there. There was a poetry writing course in the evening but not for credit. A couple of my friends went to it but I never did.

The word "creative" drives me crazy. I don't like to regard it as therapy. I was in the hospital several years ago and somebody gave me Kenneth Koch's book, *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?* And it's true, children sometimes write wonderful things, paint wonderful pictures, but I think they should be *dis*couraged. From everything I've read and heard, the number of students in English departments taking literature courses has been falling off enormously. But at the same time the number of people who want to get in the writing classes seems to get bigger and bigger. There are usually two or three being given at Harvard every year. I'd get forty applicants for ten or twelve places. Fifty. It got bigger and bigger. I don't know if they do this to offset practical concerns or what.

INTERVIEWER

I think people want to be able to say they do something creative like throw pots or write poems.

BISHOP

I just came back in March from reading in North Carolina and Arkansas and I swear if I see any more handcrafts I'll go mad! I think we should go right straight back to the machine.

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You can only use so many leather belts, after all. I'm sorry. Maybe you do some of these things.

INTERVIEWER

Do many strangers send you poems?

BISHOP

Yes. It's very hard to know what to do. Sometimes I answer. I had a fan letter the other day and it was adorable. It was in this childish handwriting. His name was Jimmy Sparks and he was in the sixth grade. He said his class was putting together a booklet of poems and he liked my poems very much—he mentioned three—because they rhymed and because they were about nature. His letter was so cute I did send him a postcard. I think he was supposed to ask me to send a handwritten poem or photograph—schools do this all the time—but he didn't say anything like that and I'm sure he forgot his mission.

INTERVIEWER

What three poems did he like? "The Sandpiper"?

BISHOP

Yes, and the one about the mirror and the moon, "Insomnia," which Marianne Moore said was a cheap love poem.

INTERVIEWER

The one that ends, ". . . and you love me"?

BISHOP

Yes. I never liked that. I almost left it out. But last year it was put to music by Elliott Carter along with five other poems of mine* and it sounded much better as a song. Yes, Marianne was very opposed to that one.

INTERVIEWER

Maybe she didn't like the last line.

*"*Anaphora,*" "*The Sandpiper,*" "*Argument,*" "*O Breath,*" and "*View of the Capitol from The Library of Congress.*"

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BISHOP

I don't think she ever believed in talking about the emotions much.

INTERVIEWER

Getting back to teaching, did you devise formal assignments when you taught at Harvard? For example, to write a villanelle?

BISHOP

Yes, I made out a whole list of weekly assignments that I gave the class; but every two or three weeks was a free assignment and they could hand in what they wanted. Some classes were so prolific that I'd declare a moratorium. I'd say, "Please, nobody write a poem for two weeks!"

INTERVIEWER

Do you think you can generalize that beginning writers write better in forms than not?

BISHOP

I don't know. We did a sestina—we started one in class by drawing words out of a hat—and I wish I'd never suggested it because it seemed to have *swept* Harvard. Later, in the applications for my class, I'd get dozens of sestinas. The students seemed to think it was my favorite form—which it isn't.

INTERVIEWER

I once tried a sestina about a woman who watches soap operas all day.

BISHOP

Did you watch them in college?

INTERVIEWER

No.

BISHOP

Well, it seemed to be a fad at Harvard. Two or three years

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ago I taught a course in prose and discovered my students were watching the soap operas every morning and afternoon. I don't know when they studied. So I watched two or three just to see what was going on. They were *boring*. And the advertising! One student wrote a story about an old man who was getting ready to have an old lady to dinner (except she was really a ghost), and he polished a plate till he could see his face in it. It was quite well done, so I read some of it aloud, and said, "But look, this is impossible. You can never see your face in a plate." The whole class, in unison, said, "Joy!" I said, "What? What are you talking about?" Well, it seems there's an ad for Joy soap liquid in which a woman holds up a plate and sees—you know the one? Even so, you can't! I found this very disturbing. TV was *real* and no one had observed that it wasn't. Like when Aristotle was right and no one pointed out, for centuries, that women *don't* have fewer teeth than men.

I had a friend bring me a small TV, black and white, when I was living in Brazil. We gave it to the maid almost immediately because we only watched it when there were things like political speeches, or a revolution coming on. But she loved it. She slept with it in her bed! I think it meant so much to her because she couldn't read. There was a soap opera that year called "The Right to Life." It changed the whole schedule of Rio society's hours because it was on from eight to nine. The usual dinner hour's eight, so either you had to eat dinner before so that the maid could watch "The Right to Life" or eat much later, when it was over. We ate dinner about ten o'clock finally so that Joanna could watch this thing. I finally decided I had to see it, too. It became a chic thing to do and everybody was talking about it. It was absolutely ghastly! They got the programs from Mexico and dubbed them in Portuguese. They were very corny and always very lurid. Corpses lying in coffins, miracles, nuns, even incest.

I had friends in Belo Horizonte and the mother and their cook and a grandchild would watch the soap operas, the *novellas*, they're called, every night. The cook would get so excited she'd talk to the screen: "No! No! Don't do that! You know he's a bad man, Doña So-and-so!" They'd get so excited,

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they'd cry. And I knew of two old ladies, sisters, who got a TV. They'd knit and knit and watch it and cry and one of them would get up and say, "Excuse me, I have to go to the bathroom," to the television!

INTERVIEWER

You were living in Brazil, weren't you, when you won the Pulitzer Prize in 1956?

BISHOP

Yes, it was pretty funny. We lived on top of a mountain peak—really way up in the air. I was alone in the house with Maria, the cook. A friend had gone to market. The telephone rang. It was a newsman from the American Embassy and he asked me who it was in English and of course it was very rare to hear someone speak in English. He said, "Do you know you've won the Pulitzer Prize?" Well, I thought it was a joke. I said, "Oh, come on." And he said, "Don't you hear me?" The telephone connection was very bad and he was shrieking. And I said, "Oh, it can't be." But he said it wasn't a joke. I couldn't make an impression on Maria with this news, but I felt I had to share it, so I hurried down the mountain a half-mile or so to the next house but no one was at home. I thought I should do something to celebrate, have a glass of wine or something. But all I could find in that house, a friend's, were some cookies from America, some awful chocolate cookies—Oreos, I think—so I ended up eating two of those. And that's how I celebrated winning the Pulitzer Prize.

The next day there was a picture in the afternoon paper—they take such things very seriously in Brazil—and the day after that my Brazilian friend went to market again. There was a big covered market with stalls for every kind of comestible, and there was one vegetable man we always went to. He said, "Wasn't that Doña Elizabetchy's picture in the paper yesterday?" She said, "Yes, it was. She won a prize." And he said, "You know, it's amazing! Last week Señora (Somebody) took a chance on a bicycle and *she* won! My customers are so lucky!" Isn't that marvelous?!

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INTERVIEWER

I'd like to talk a little bit about your stories, especially "In the Village," which I've always admired. Do you see any connection, other than the obvious one of shared subject matter, between your stories and poems? In "method of attack," for example?

BISHOP

They're very closely related. I suspect that some of the stories I've written are actually prose poems and not very good stories. I have four about Nova Scotia. One came out last year in the *Southern Review*. I'm working on a long one now that I hope to finish this summer. . . . "In the Village" was funny. I had made notes for various bits of it and was given too much cortisone—I have very bad asthma from time to time—and you don't need any sleep. You feel wonderful while it's going on but to get off it is awful. So I couldn't sleep much and I sat up all night in the tropical heat. The story came from a combination of cortisone, I think, and the gin and tonic I drank in the middle of the night. I wrote it in two nights.

INTERVIEWER

That's incredible! It's a long, long story.

BISHOP

Extraordinary. I wish I could do it again but I'll never take cortisone again, if I can possibly avoid it.

INTERVIEWER

I'm always interested in how different poets go about writing about their childhood.

BISHOP

Everybody does. You can't help it, I suppose. You are fearfully observant then. You notice all kinds of things but there's no way of putting them all together. My memories of some of those days are so much clearer than things that happened in 1950, say. I don't think one should make a cult of writing

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about childhood, however. I've always tried to avoid it. I find I have written some, I must say. I went to an analyst for a couple of years off and on in the forties, a very nice woman who was especially interested in writers, writers and blacks. She said it was amazing that I would remember things that happened to me when I was two. It's very rare, but apparently writers often do.

INTERVIEWER

Do you know what your earliest memory is?

BISHOP

I think I remember learning to walk. My mother was away and my grandmother was trying to encourage me to walk. It was in Canada and she had lots of plants in the window the way all ladies do there. I can remember this blur of plants and my grandmother holding out her arms. I must have toddled. It seems to me it's a memory. It's very hazy. I told my grandmother years and years later and she said, "Yes, you did learn to walk while your mother was visiting someone." But you walk when you're one, don't you?

I remember my mother taking me for a ride on the swan boats here in Boston. I think I was three then. It was before we went back to Canada. Mother was dressed all in black— widows were in those days. She had a box of mixed peanuts and raisins. There were real swans floating around. I don't think they have them anymore. A swan came up and she fed it and it bit her finger. Maybe she just told me this but I believed it because she showed me her black kid glove and said, "See." The finger was split. Well, I was thrilled to death! Robert Lowell put those swan boats in two or three of the *Lord Weary's Castle* poems.

INTERVIEWER

Your childhood was difficult, and yet in many of your stories and poems about that time there's a tremendously lyrical quality as well as a great sense of loss and tragedy.

BISHOP

My father died, my mother went crazy when I was four or five

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years old. My relatives, I think they all felt so sorry for this child that they tried to do their very best. And I think they did. I lived with my grandparents in Nova Scotia. Then I lived with the ones in Worcester, Massachusetts, very briefly and got terribly sick. This was when I was six and seven. Then I lived with my mother's older sister in Boston. I used to go to Nova Scotia for the summer. When I was twelve or thirteen I was improved enough to go to summer camp at Wellfleet until I went away to school when I was fifteen or sixteen. My aunt was devoted to me and she was awfully nice. She was married and had no children. But my relationship with my relatives—I was always a sort of a guest, and I think I've always felt like that.

INTERVIEWER

Was your adolescence a calmer time?

BISHOP

I was very romantic. I once walked from Nauset Light—I don't think it exists anymore—which is the beginning of the elbow [of Cape Cod], to the tip, Provincetown, all alone. It took me a night and a day. I went swimming from time to time but at that time the beach was absolutely deserted. There wasn't anything on the back shore, no buildings.

INTERVIEWER

How old would you have been?

BISHOP

Seventeen or eighteen. That's why I'd never go back—because I can't bear to think of the way it is now. . . . I haven't been to Nantucket since, well, I hate to say. My senior year at college I went there for Christmas with my then-boyfriend. Nobody knew we were there. It was this wonderful, romantic trip. We went the day after Christmas and stayed for about a week. It was terribly cold but beautiful. We took long walks on the moors. We stayed at a very nice inn and we thought that probably the landlady would throw us out (we were very young and this kind of thing wasn't so common then). We had a bottle of sherry or something innocent like that. On New

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Year's Eve about ten o'clock there was a knock on the door. It was our landlady with a tray of hot grogs! She came in and we had the loveliest time. She knew the people who ran the museum and they opened it for us. There are a couple of wonderful museums there.

INTERVIEWER

I heard a story that you once spent a night in a tree at Vassar outside Cushing dormitory. Is it true?

BISHOP

Yes, it was me, me and a friend whose name I can't remember. We really were crazy and those trees were wonderful to climb. I used to be a great tree climber. Oh, we probably gave up about three in the morning. How did that ever get around? I can't imagine! We stopped being friends afterwards. Well, actually she had invited two boys from West Point for the weekend and I found myself *stuck* with this youth all in—[her hands draw an imagined cape and uniform in the air]—the dullest boy! I didn't know what to say! I nearly went mad. I think I sort of dropped the friend at that point. . . . I lived in a great big corner room on the top floor of Cushing and I apparently had registered a little late because I had a roommate whom I had never wanted to have. A strange girl named Constance. I remember her entire side of the room was furnished in Scotty dogs—pillows, pictures, engravings, and photographs. And mine was rather bare. Except that I probably wasn't a good roommate either because I had a theory at that time that one should write down all one's dreams. That that was the way to write poetry. So I kept a notebook of my dreams and thought if you ate a lot of awful cheese at bedtime you'd have interesting dreams. I went to Vassar with a pot about this big—it did have a cover!—of Roquefort cheese that I kept in the bottom of my bookcase. . . . I think everyone's given to eccentricities at that age. I've heard that at Oxford Auden slept with a revolver under his pillow.

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INTERVIEWER

As a young woman, did you have a sense of yourself as a writer?

BISHOP

No, it all just happens without your thinking about it. I never meant to go to Brazil. I never meant doing any of these things. I'm afraid in my life everything has just *happened.*

INTERVIEWER

You like to think there are reasons—

BISHOP

Yes, that people plan ahead, but I'm afraid I really didn't.

INTERVIEWER

But you'd always been interested in writing?

BISHOP

I'd written since I was a child but when I went to Vassar I was going to be a composer. I'd studied music at Walnut Hill and had a rather good teacher. I'd had a year of counterpoint and I also played the piano. At Vassar you had to perform in public once a month. Well, this terrified me. I really was sick. So I played once and then I gave up the piano because I couldn't bear it. I don't think I'd mind now but I can't play the piano anymore. Then the next year I switched to English.

It was a very literary class. Mary McCarthy was a year ahead of me. Eleanor Clark was in my class. And Muriel Rukeyser, for freshman year. We started a magazine you may have heard of, *Con Spirito.* I think I was a junior then. There were six or seven of us—Mary, Eleanor Clark and her older sister, my friends Margaret Miller and Frani Blough, and a couple of others. It was during Prohibition and we used to go downtown to a speakeasy and drink wine out of teacups. That was our big vice. Ghastly stuff! Most of us had submitted things to the *Vassar Review* and they'd been turned down. It was very old-fashioned then. We were all rather put out because *we* thought

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we were good. So we thought, well, we'll start our own magazine. We thought it would be nice to have it anonymous, which it was. After its third issue the *Vassar Review* came around and a couple of our editors became editors on it and then they published things by us. But we had a wonderful time doing it while it lasted.

INTERVIEWER

I read in another interview you gave that you had enrolled or were ready to enroll after college in Cornell Medical School.

BISHOP

I think I had all the forms. This was the year after I had graduated from Vassar. But then I discovered I would have to take German and I'd already given up on German once, I thought it was so difficult. And I would have had to take another year of chemistry. I'd already published a few things and I think Marianne [Moore] discouraged me, and I didn't go. I just went off to Europe instead.

INTERVIEWER

Did the Depression have much reality for college students in the thirties?

BISHOP

Everybody was frantic trying to get jobs. All the intellectuals were Communist except me. I'm always very perverse so I went in for T.S. Eliot and Anglo-Catholicism. But the spirit was pretty radical. It's funny. The girl who was the biggest radical—she was a year ahead of me—has been married for years and years to one of the heads of Time-Life. I've forgotten his name. He's very famous and couldn't be more conservative. He writes shocking editorials. I can still see her standing outside the library with a tambourine collecting money for this cause and that cause.

INTERVIEWER

Wanting to be a composer, a doctor, or a writer—how do

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you account for it?

BISHOP

Oh, I was interested in all those things. I'd like to be a painter most, I think. I never really sat down and said to myself, "I'm going to be a poet." Never in my life. I'm still surprised that people think I am. . . . I started publishing things in my senior year, I think, and I remember my first check for thirty-five dollars and that was rather an exciting moment. It was from something called *The Magazine*, published in California. They took a poem, they took a story—oh, I wish those poems had never been published! They're terrible! I did show the check to my roommate. I was on the newspaper, *The Miscellany*—and I really was, I don't know, mysterious. On the newspaper board they used to sit around and talk about how they could get published and so on and so on. I'd just hold my tongue. I was embarrassed by it. And still am. There's nothing more embarrassing than being a poet, really.

INTERVIEWER

It's especially difficult to tell people you're meeting for the first time that that's what you do.

BISHOP

Just last week a friend and I went to visit a wonderful lady I know in Quebec. She's seventy-four or seventy-five. And she didn't say this to me but she said to my friend, Alice, "I'd like to ask my neighbor who has the big house next door to dinner, and she's so nice, but she'd be bound to ask Elizabeth what she does and if Elizabeth said she wrote poetry, the poor woman wouldn't say another word all evening!" This is awful, you know, and I think no matter how modest you think you feel or how minor you think you are, there must be an awful core of ego somewhere for you to set yourself up to write poetry. I've never *felt* it, but it must be there.

INTERVIEWER

In your letter to me, you sounded rather wary of inter-

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viewers. Do you feel you've been misrepresented in interviews? For example, that your refusal to appear in all-women poetry anthologies has been misunderstood as a kind of disapproval of the feminist movement.

BISHOP

I've always considered myself a strong feminist. Recently I was interviewed by a reporter from *The Chicago Tribune*. After I talked to the girl for a few minutes, I realized that she wanted to play me off as an "old-fashioned" against Erica Jong, and Adrienne [Rich], whom I like, and other violently feminist people. Which isn't true at all. I finally asked her if she'd ever read any of my poems. Well, it seemed she'd read *one* poem. I didn't see how she could interview me if she didn't know anything about me at all and I told her so. She was nice enough to print a separate piece in *The Chicago Tribune* apart from the longer article on the others. I had said that I didn't believe in propaganda in poetry. That it rarely worked. What she had me saying was, "Miss Bishop does not believe that poetry should convey the poet's personal philosophy." Which made me sound like a complete dumbbell! Where she got that, I don't know. This is why one gets nervous about interviews.

INTERVIEWER

Do you generally agree with anthologists' choices? Do you have any poems that are personal favorites? Ones you'd like to see anthologized that aren't?

BISHOP

I'd rather have—well, anything except "The Fish"! I've declared a moratorium on that. Anthologists repeat each other so finally a few years ago I said nobody could reprint "The Fish" unless they reprinted three others because I got so sick of it.

INTERVIEWER

One or two more questions. You went to Yaddo several times early in your career. Did you find the atmosphere at an

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artist's colony helpful to your writing?

BISHOP

I went to Yaddo twice, once in the summer for two weeks, and for several months the winter before I went to Brazil. Mrs. Ames was very much in evidence then. I didn't like it in the summer because of the incessant coming and going, but the winter was rather different. There were only six of us and just by luck we all liked each other and had a very good time. I wrote one poem, I think, in that whole stretch. The first time I liked the horse races, I'm afraid. In the summer—I think this still goes on—you can walk through the Whitney estate to the tracks. A friend and I used to walk there early in the morning and sit at the track and have coffee and blueberry muffins while they exercised the horses. I loved that. We went to a sale of yearlings in August and that was beautiful. The sale was in a big tent. The grooms had brass dustpans and brooms with brass handles and they'd go around after the little colts and sweep up the manure. That's what I remember best about Yaddo.

INTERVIEWER

It was around the time that you went to Yaddo, wasn't it, that you were Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress? Was that year in Washington more productive than your Yaddo experience?

BISHOP

I've suffered because I've been so shy all my life. A few years later I might have enjoyed it more but at the time I didn't like it much. I hated Washington. There were so many government buildings that looked like Moscow. There was a very nice secretary, Phyllis Armstrong, who got me through. I think she did most of the work. I'd write something and she'd say, "Oh, no, that isn't official," so then she'd take it and rewrite it in gobbledegook. We used to bet on the horses—Phyllis always bet the daily double. She and I would sit there reading *The Racing Form* and poets would come to call and Phyllis and I would be talking about our bets!

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All the "survivors" of that job—a lot of them are dead—were invited to read there recently. There were thirteen of us, unfortunately.

INTERVIEWER

A friend of mine tried to get into that reading and she said it was jammed.

BISHOP

It was *mobbed*! And I don't know why. It couldn't have been a duller, more awful occasion. I think we were supposedly limited to ten minutes. I *stuck* to it. But there's no stopping somebody like James Dickey. Stafford was good. I'd never heard him and never met him. He read one very short poem that really brought tears to my eyes he read it so beautifully.

I'm not very fond of poetry readings. I'd much rather read the book. I know I'm wrong. I've only been to a few poetry readings I could *bear*. Of course, you're too young to have gone through the Dylan Thomas craze. . . .

When it was somebody like Cal Lowell or Marianne Moore, it's as if they were my children. I'd get terribly upset. I went to hear Marianne several times and finally I just couldn't go because I'd sit there with tears running down my face. I don't know, it's sort of embarrassing. You're so afraid they'll do something wrong.

Cal thought that the most important thing about readings was the remarks poets made in between the poems. The first time I heard him read was years ago at the New School for Social Research in a small, grey auditorium. It was with Allen Tate and Louise Bogan. Cal was very much younger than anybody else and had published just two books. He read a long, endless poem—I've forgotten its title*—about a Canadian nun in New Brunswick. I've forgotten what the point of the poem is, but it's very, very long and it's quite beautiful, particularly in the beginning. Well, he started, and he read very badly. He kind of droned and everybody was trying to get it. He had gotten

*"Mother Marie Therese" in *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*.

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about two-thirds of the way through when somebody yelled, "Fire!" There was a small fire in the lobby, nothing much, that was put out in about five minutes and everybody went back to their seats. Poor Cal said, "I think I'd better begin over again," so he read the whole thing all over again! But his reading got much, much better in later years.

INTERVIEWER

He couldn't have done any better than the record the Poetry Center recently put out. It's wonderful. And very funny.

BISHOP

I haven't the courage to hear it.

—**Elizabeth Spires**

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Jonathan Galassi

Elms

to a teacher

Your "yet-to-be-dismantled" elms are few,
and by the time you read this may be gone.
In my own childhood we had one or two
that framed the lawn before the hurricane,
trees that were far too noble to survive
a time like ours, too slender or sublime.
Something in us wouldn't let them live.

Or was it only that they'd served their time?
"The size of our abidance" wasn't theirs,
the way it can't be yours. That is a trait
of nature, as it is a trait of ours
to see in something passing something great:
our backwardlookingness that makes a tree
the genius of the place it cannot be.

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Portfolio

Four Stories

Vernon Fisher

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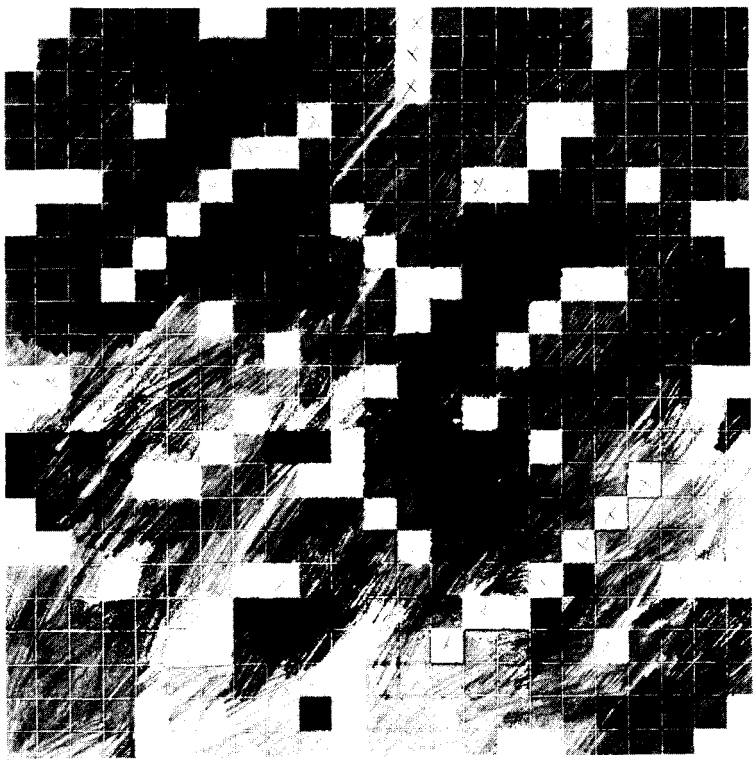
The President's Golf Lesson

Home from school, I am slumped in a chair staring at an unfinished drawing. It is late in the afternoon, almost too late to begin: "What is it about teaching that makes me so tired?" I wonder.



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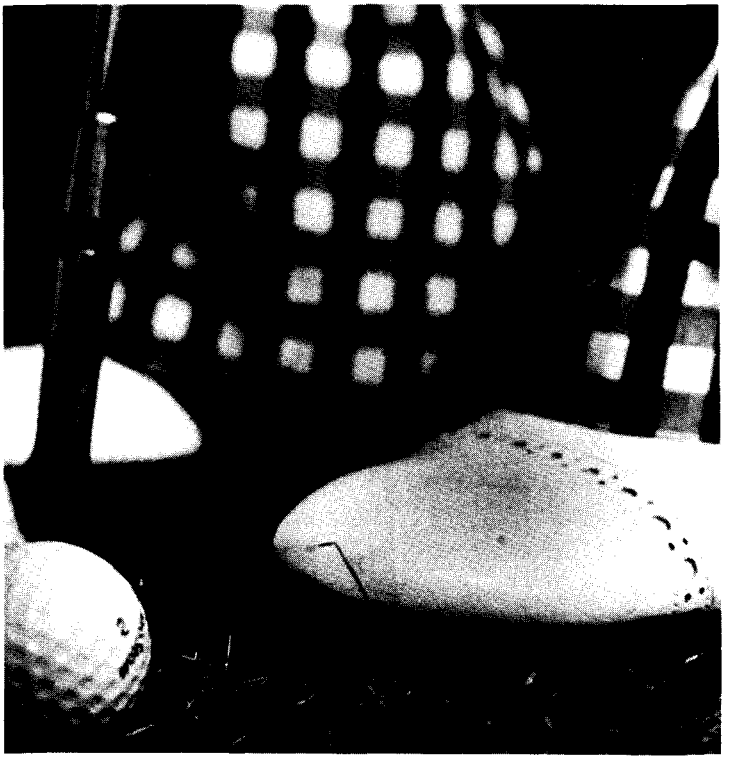

Jimmy Carter is hitting golf balls. He has nice clothes and wonderful equipment, but his swing is awkward and jerky. The balls bounce and scoot across the grass in every direction. Tactfully, I give him a few tips on his swing: "Keep your head down, make a complete shoulder turn, and shift your weight to the left as you follow through." Then to demonstrate, I borrow his six iron. The ball flies out in a perfect arc and drops softly to the green 170 yards away. I turn to find him unimpressed.

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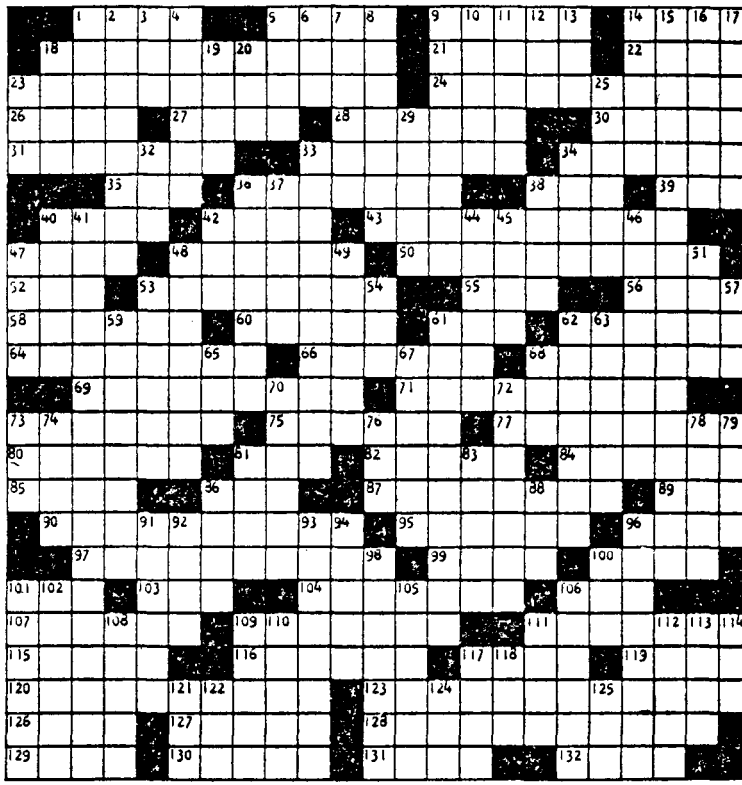

"I've had other lessons," he says, "and they all told me something different. It's just a matter of opinion. Besides, I'm just playing for my own enjoyment."

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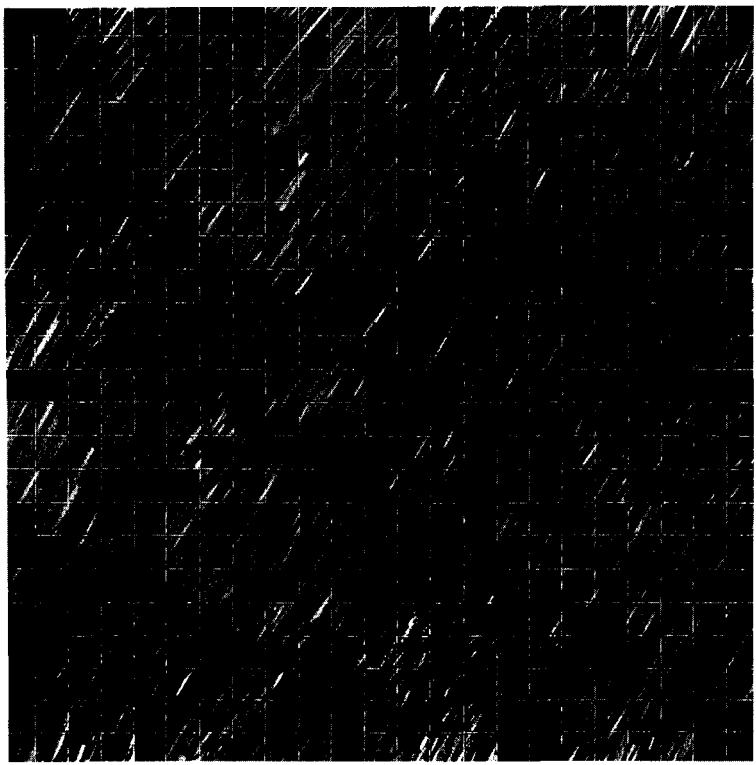

When I awake, it is already dark. Outside, the wind is rattling dead leaves across the yard. For a moment, I mistake the sound for rain.

Vernon Fisher 1980

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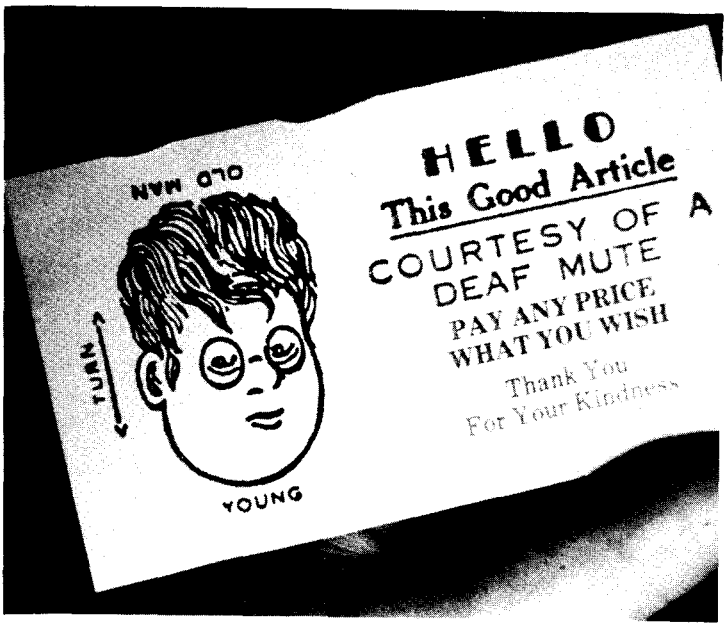
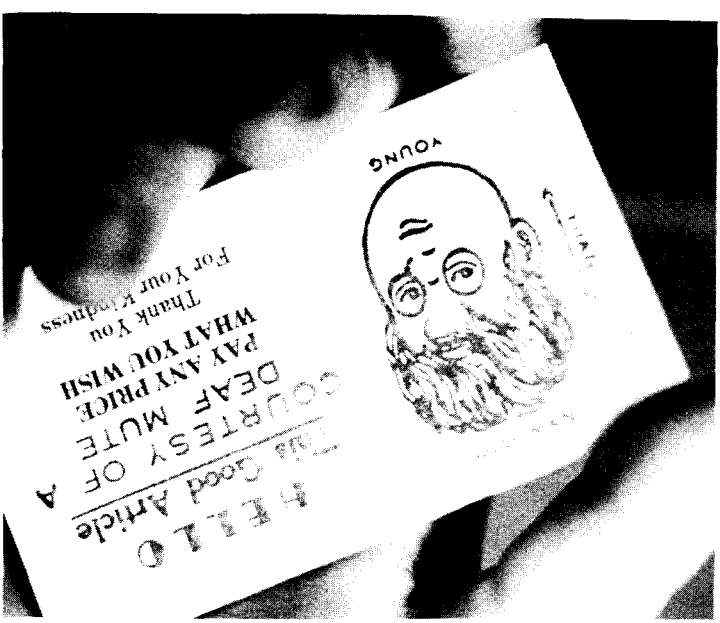


The deaf mute approached us with a card.



We passed it around the table.

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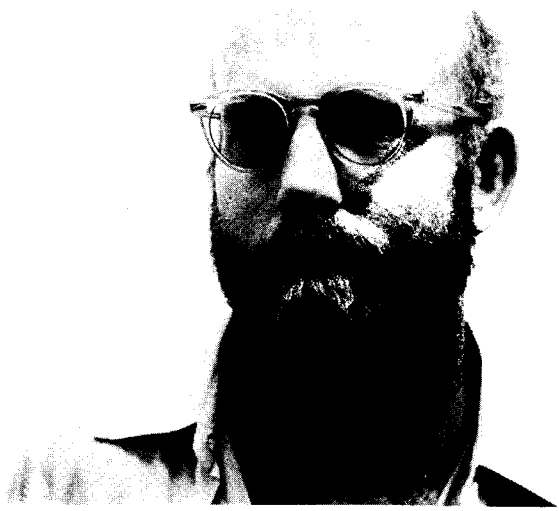

Someone said it looked like Murray.

We all agreed.

Vernon Fisher 1977

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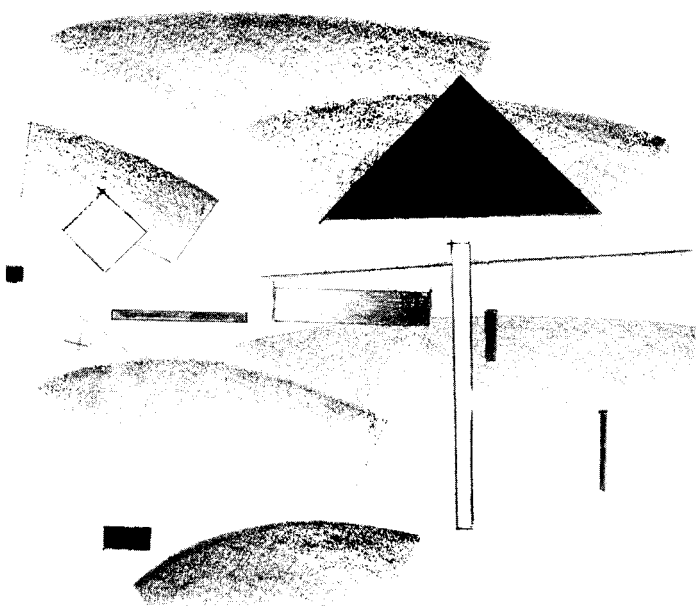
Desert Malevich

The ascent to the heights of non-objective art is arduous and painful, but it is rewarding nevertheless. The familiar begins to recede into the background. The contours of the objective world fade more and more, step by step, until finally the world—everything by which we have lived—becomes lost to sight. No more likeness of reality, no idealistic images —nothing but a desert.

I was fearful of leaving the ordinary world of will and idea, but the promise of liberation drew me onward—into a desert filled with the spirit of non-objective sensation—where nothing is real except feeling.

Kasimir Malevich 1927



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The going was so rough that he walked for an hour without losing sight of the road completely. Finally, he topped a hogback and for the first time when he looked back he could no longer see it. Spreading out behind him in all directions he could see nothing but endless miles of rock and cactus and the distant mountains of Mexico.

Losing sight of the road gave him a strange feeling. It was as if he had closed a door that once closed had actually ceased to exist.

He stood on the crest of the hogback. Slowly he extended his arms. With his outstretched fingers he could feel the faint, rhythmic pulse of the great Chihuahuan Desert.

Vernon Fisher 1978

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Lecture on Photography

I am crouched beside the camper holding my arm down between my legs. Blood streams from under my shirtsleeve and down my wrist and off the tips of my fingers. It is making bright red flecks on my shoes as it spatters off the rocks between my feet.

I am lying down. Looking up over the side of the camper I can see the dark sky, almost indigo, and white drifting clouds like cotton. They are suspended in the sky: it is everything else that is moving. I shut my eyes. Beneath me I think I can feel the turning of the earth.

A small boy is riding a merry-go-round. It is his first time ever. He is smiling. The music stops suddenly without warning and the merry-go-round begins to slow. He turns his head with a puzzled look: "Is this how it ends or what?"

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Of all the arts, photography seems to be the best suited for penetrating the nature of reality and existence. Taken at the decisive moment, a photograph can not only capture in visual terms space and time as defined by light, but can render intelligible, as surely as can any of the arts, the essential structure and meaning of the undifferentiated world. It is able to accomplish this, furthermore, free from the problems of credibility inherent in other art media. Simply stated, a photograph is believable. Photography produces an image so free from obfuscations of handling and point of view, and yet so complete with authoritative detail, that it becomes credible on its own terms, quite unencumbered with the problems of the teleological historicism central to the practice of modernist painting and sculpture.

Vernon Fisher 1977

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The Parade Ends

Reinaldo Arenas

Reinaldo Arenas was born in Holguín, Cuba, in 1943. The youngest of a group of brilliant writers that developed in the Revolution (Reynaldo González, Miguel Barnet, Nancy Morejón), he is the author of three novels and a collection of stories. He came to the United States in the spring of 1980 with the refugees who left the island in the Mariel boatlift after the notorious incident at the Peruvian Embassy in Havana. "The Parade Ends," which focuses on that incident, is Arenas's first story in exile.

In the middle-to-late sixties Arenas seemed destined to become the first great writer produced by the Revolution, although there was obviously resistance to acknowledge him on the part of some cultural bureaucrats. He had come to Havana untutored and wishing to study planning. He soon joined the circle of writers who had belonged to the Orígenes *group: José Lezama Lima, Eliseo Diego, Cintio Vitier and Virgilio Piñera.* Orígenes *was an influential literary journal based in Havana during the forties and early fifties, edited by Lezama Lima and*

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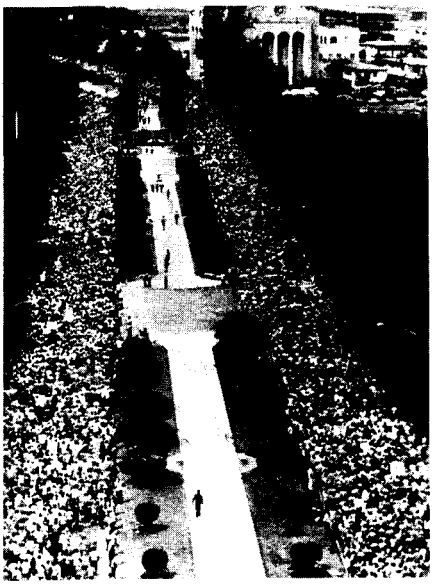
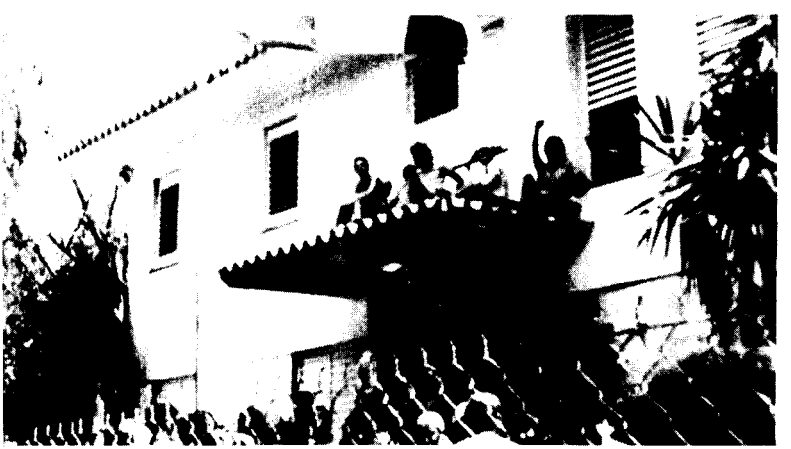


A main avenue that passes the Peruvian Embassy, jammed by what Cuban officials claimed was 1 million demonstrators (4/19/80). The government organized the demonstration to express its displeasure with the 10,000 Cubans seeking asylum in the embassy, and to commemorate the 19th anniversary of the Bay of Pigs victory.



Façade of the Peruvian Embassy in Havana where the thousands of Cubans took refuge (4/16/80).

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José Rodríguez Feo. This group, though not actively committed to the Revolution (many were Catholics and did not subscribe to the government's puritanical rhetoric), remained in Cuba. Several were given jobs at the Union of Writers, others in the National Library. A few became internationally known after the Revolution (particularly Lezama), though they always chose or were forced to remain out of the limelight. Arenas also worked at the Library and he too failed to surface even when accepted Cuban critics like Salvador Bueno praised his second novel, El mundo alucinante, *published in Mexico. He did not become involved in any of the politico-literary imbroglios. No one mentioned him during the two "Padilla Affairs," and his signature does not appear in the letter that Cuban intellectuals sent to Pablo Neruda chastising him for visiting the United States to attend a P.E.N. Club meeting in 1968.* El mundo alucinante *was making Arenas famous abroad when news trickled out of Cuba that he had been jailed on a morals charge. In a recent interview with Enrico Mario Santí, Arenas denies the validity of the charges. After a little over a year in jail, Arenas spent the seventies in obscurity in Cuba, though elsewhere he was considered as one of the best young Latin American writers.*

The title of this story refers to an earlier story by Arenas, "The Parade Begins," in which the victorious rebels enter town after the fall of Batista. It will be interesting to observe how Arenas's work develops after the separation of exile. "The Parade Ends" augurs well.

Roberto González Echevarría

For Lázaro Gómez, witness

Now she's escaping me. She's losing me again in this sea of legs so tightly packed that they join together, in this jumble of rags and compressed bodies, over puddles of piss, of shit, of mud, between bare feet that sink in that flattened paste of excrement. I'm looking for her, I keep looking for her as if she were (as in fact she is) my only salvation. But, the bitch, she's slipping away again. There she goes, miraculously making her way, sliding between muddy shoes, between bodies that can't even

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fall over, though they're fainting (they're jammed so tightly against one another), through the crying, the piss, getting away from me with each wriggle, while avoiding at the same time, thanks to I don't know what incredible intuition, the fatal footfall. My life depends on you, my life depends on you, I say to her, crawling along too, like her. And I pursue her, I keep pursuing her in the shit and the mud, laboriously and mechanically pushing aside bellies, asses, feet, arms, thighs, a whole amalgam of stinking flesh and bones, a whole arsenal of vociferating lumps that move, that want, like me, to walk around, change places, turn, and that only cause contractions, wiggling, stretching, convulsions which don't manage to cut the knot, take a step, break into a run, to show some real movement, something that really gets going, advances, leaving everyone trapped in one big spiderweb which stretches out on one side, contracts here, rises over there, but doesn't manage to break loose anywhere. So they draw back and push forward, back and forth, kneeing and kicking, now raising their arms, their heads, their noses, everything to the sky in order to breathe, to see something other than the compression of their own stinking bodies. But I'm following, I haven't lost sight of her yet and I'm following, pushing these bodies aside, crawling, kicked and cursed, but without giving up, pursuing her. For there (for with her), I say to myself, goes my life. . . Life, above all, life in spite of everything, life however it is, even without anything, even without you (and in spite of you) amid the din that rises now, amid the shrieks and the songs, for they're singing, singing again, and no less than the national anthem. Life, now, while I pursue you over the excrement to the sound of the notes (or shouts) of the national anthem, holding you as justification and refuge, as an immediate solution, as sustenance, the rest (what is the rest?) we'll see about later. Now only that lizard matters to me, that damned lizard that's hiding from me again, sly and covered with excrement, between the thousands and thousands of feet which are also sinking in the shit. *Life*. . . I was, again, like so many years ago already, at that extreme where life is not so much as a useless and humiliating repetition, but only the incessant memory

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of that repetition, which, in the beginning, was also a repetition, I was at that point, at that final place, at that extreme, where the act of being doesn't even matter, or rather it isn't really certain that it's true. So, standing, or better yet, bent over, since the garret didn't allow him to straighten out completely, he contemplated inside that old room of ancient hotel come to ruin and hence inhabited by people like him or even worse—vociferating creatures with no other concept nor principle nor dream but to be able, at all costs, and in spite of everything, to survive, that is to say, not to die of hunger right away—, he was contemplating, staring in that position, without moving, not at the past nor the future, both not only dark but illusory, he was staring, in short, at the impoverished piece of improvised stairway that led "on high," that is to say to the narrow dormer where he had to walk not bent over, but on all fours so as not to smash his head against the ceiling. That's how he was, between the front wall that faced the hallway and the other wall that faced the other wall of the other building. Now he advanced a little more and his eyes met flush with his eyes, with his figure reflected in the mirror incrusted (screwed) right in the exit door of the hall, which was always being kept temporarily closed. He wasn't that one then, now he was this one. He wasn't running through the savannahs or grasslands anymore. He was running, sometimes, through the hysterical tumult, trying to catch a crowded bus or to get in line for bread or yogurt. So, making an effort, he separated himself from his image—this one for now—, recrossed the cubicle, his kingdom, in two steps, sat down on a seat, also improvised thanks to a combination of poverty and necessity, a kind of bench with a parody of a pillow or cushion covering it. Then, before even thinking about a solution, before he could even think about how to think of a solution, the roar of a wave crashed violently, the scream, the howl of a boy (it had to be called something), the inordinate noise of a television, some radios, and, besides, of someone knocking at the closed door of the elevator, and another who, from a window, was calling in endlessly repeated shouts to somebody who obviously isn't there, or who's deaf, or doesn't want to answer, or died, finally his neighbors, people

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just like him, made him forget that which, like a puff of air, had crossed his imagination, had attempted to conceive—what was it, what was it—. And, hearing that kind of incessant paraphernalia, an enormous sensation of calm invaded him, a unanimous sensation of renunciation, of impotence, overwhelmed him, as always, since years ago, in a sort of stupor, of inertia, of absolute abandon, of mortal (hope?) grief, a sensation of feeling beyond all resistance, all competition, all vital possibility, a security (a rest, a weariness) of absolute death, of death definitive and complete, yes, if it weren't that in spite of everything he had a friend, and, therefore, he was still breathing. . . But with difficulty, with quite a bit of difficulty, raising and spreading out his hands, only in that way was he able to take in a little of that contaminated and absolutely stinking air and to continue, that is to dive again into the furor and the sweating bodies, crawling once again through the dirt, pushing aside legs, humps, feet, in order to reach where he was, because he was certain that he was there, naturally, in that tumult, someplace in that tumult forming a part of the tumult; that's why he was pushing, raising his head, breathing, searching, and continuing to brush aside bodies, bundles, without excusing himself, who was going to say "excuse me" in such a place?, and he continued, calling out to him sometimes, trying to make himself heard in the midst of that din. And the terrible thing was that with each moment it was becoming more difficult to go on. More were coming, more people kept arriving, more people who were jumping the fence (the gate had already been closed) and entering; they were entering however they could, punching, kicking. What an uproar, what an uproar. In the middle of the clamor and the dust and the shooting they kept advancing, climbing up the fence and jumping; old people, pregnant women, babies, kids; especially kids, all of them wanting to reach the wire fence, while the group of soldiers was getting thicker. And they kept arriving, police, militia, men in uniform or in disguise, disguised as civilians, preventing the others—the crowd—from approaching the fence. It was no longer a cordon, but a triple cordon, heavily armed. Bursts from machine guns were heard now and shouts

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of "Stop right there, you son of a bitch!" and again the clamor and the howling of those who, right there before their very eyes, were being ripped open by machine-gun fire, without having been able to jump the fence, without even having been able to touch it, without having been able to make it. Immediately, numerous men (military and civilian) hurriedly getting out of their Alfa-Romeos, were dragging the corpses to their vehicles and departing hastily down Fifth Avenue. But now, not only were they running a risk out there, the inflamed mob, who at all costs wanted to get past the cordon (the cordons) and enter, but those inside too were being machine-gunned. Somebody, one of the top brass, a *mayimbe*, a *pincho*, pulled up abruptly before the fence, and, beside himself, began shooting at them. In the midst of an infernal roar, the mass retreated without being able to retreat, they pressed even more tightly together, they hid their heads behind each other, they backed up as if trying to climb inside themselves, and whoever fell, having been hit by a shot, or simply having slipped, couldn't catch himself anymore, his last sight would be the thousands and thousands of feet in a circular stampede, stepping on him and returning to step on him again. "The anthem, the anthem," someone shouted. And suddenly, only a single unanimous and thundering voice came out of the immense, besieged multitude, a single song, loud, coughed up, out of tune, extraordinary, crossing the fence and filling the night. Ridiculous, ridiculous, he was saying to himself, but for a moment he interrupted his search, he stopped, ridiculous, ridiculous, he was saying to himself, that anthem again, ridiculous, ridiculous, but he was crying... Horrible, horrible, because everything was horrible, terrifying, anew, again, always; but worse, but worse now, because now he couldn't give himself the luxury, as then, of wasting time, his time. So, bent over in his low and narrow hole, he was reviewing, again reviewing all the time lived, all the time lost, and he was stopping there once again, at the improvised and urgent stairway, beneath the roof, also improvised and urgent, by the urgent and improvised table (the cover of a tank over a barrel), improvised, improvised, improvised, everything improvised, and,

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what's more, he himself, everyone always improvising and accepting. Hearing the improvised and endless speeches; living in an improvised poverty where even the terror that he was suffering today, tomorrow, provisionally, would be substituted by another, reinforced, renovated, augmented, and so on, by improvisation. Provisionally suffering improvised laws that suddenly fomented crimes instead of reducing them; suffering improvised rages which naturally assailed him and those who were living like him, on the margins, in a cloud, in another world, that is in this improvised 3′ x 4′ room over an improvised garret, alone... To leave for the street, to go down the garbage-strewn stairs (the elevator never worked), to reach the street, what for?... To leave was to declare (one more time) that there was no exit. To leave was to know that it was impossible to go anywhere. To leave was to risk that they would ask him for identification, information, and, in spite of carrying on him (as he always carried) all the calamities of the system: identity card, union card, worker's card, obligatory military service card, CDR card, in short, in spite of going like a noble and tame beast, well branded, with all of the marks with which his owner obligatorily stamped him, in spite of everything, to leave was to run the risk of "falling," of "shining" badly in the eyes of a cop, who could designate him (out of moral conviction) as a *suspicious character*, *unclear*, *unstable*, *untrustworthy*, and without further legal procedure, to end up in a cell, as had happened to him already on several occasions. Besides, he knew what that meant. On the other hand, what a spectacle he was going to see if he went out, if not the anatomy of his own sadness, the overwhelming spectacle of a city in collapse, the taciturn figures, timid or aggressive, hungry and desperate, and, of course, hunted. Figures, besides, now alien to dialogue, to intimacy, to any possibility of communication, ready, simply (vitally), to snatch his wallet, tear off his watch, tear the glasses right off his face, in the event that he committed the imprudence of going out to the street with them on, and that's all, to run off through the deteriorating panorama. Besides, he, and here was his triumph, his means of escape, his hope, was not completely certain that he would be (that he

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would feel) absolutely alone... And with that hope, with that good fortune, he remained, just as he was: one foot on the improvised stairway, his face fading already before the broken-down mirror, his head bent so as not to bump into the ceiling of the garret, serene, still, waiting, since he was sure that, from one moment to the next, like every morning, yes, it had to be so, his friend would arrive. Finally, he took a step through the improvised room and sat down in the improvised seat. But where had he gone, where was he, where can he be, but you have to go on, you have to keep advancing, you have to find him somewhere, up on the roofs, up a tree, he can't have vanished, he has to be in this chaos, in this immense mob which is getting thicker now, more hysterical, grabbing hold of somebody, at last, throwing him in the air and catching him again only to keep throwing him, it's a police infiltrator, they say, who was trying to take the Peruvian flag down from the flag pole. And now thousands of arms, of closed fists, of desperate people, pounce on him, swinging him around. "Lynch him, execute him, tear him to pieces," they shout, and the man disappears and appears and disappears again, swallowed by that desperate sea until he's hurled outside the fence, where the shooting continues, now at the trees, in the air, at the cars, which, from a considerable distance and at great speeds, try to break through the barriers and get in. I go up to where the furor is most intense, I scrutinize, I push, I keep looking around among the desperate faces, among those who sleep standing up... But nothing, but nothing, I don't see you, although I know, I know very well that you're someplace nearby, here, not far from me, looking for me, too. We are here, we are here, although we haven't been able to find each other yet, amid the danger and the shooting, amid the stench that keeps getting more intolerable, and the rioting, and the punches, and the quarreling, the fights which desperation and hunger and this overcrowding provoke, but at least able then, now, right now, to scream, to scream... To get out, to get out, that was the question. Before it had been to join up, to liberate, to rise up, to hide, to emancipate ourselves, to gain independence, but now none of that was possible anymore, not because it had

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succeeded or it wasn't necessary, but rather because now it wasn't even possible to conceive of those ideas out loud, nor even in a whisper, it was pressing, and so we two keep talking, while we walk fearfully along the Malecón, all but deserted, although it isn't even 10 o'clock at night yet. The problem isn't to say "we've got to get out," I know that as well as you, the other one, his friend, was saying to him. The problem, the question, is how to leave here. Yes, we were saying, how to leave. On one or two inner tubes from a truck, you say, with a canvas on top and a pair of oars. To launch ourselves to sea. There's no other escape. It's true, it's true, I was saying. There's no other solution. I, you say, can get the inner tubes and the canvas. You have to keep them in your room. My family mustn't find out anything. But that's not the hardest part, you were saying. There's the other. The surveillance. There's surveillance everywhere, you know, one can't even approach the beach at night. The most difficult thing is, precisely, to reach the coast with two tubes, and food and some bottles of water. Yes, I was saying. That's right. First we have to go over the terrain, to study it, to go without anything, to see which is the best spot. I've heard it's Pinar del Río, you were saying. At least the current is strongest there, it can carry us, bring us way out. Some boat will pick us up. They have to pick us up, once at sea somebody will spot us, and pick us up. But listen, I say, it's possible that a Russian ship, or Chinese or Cuban could pick us up and we'll return again, not here, to the Malecón, to the streets, but to jail. . . They're giving five years now for what they call illegal exits, you say. And where are the legal ones? I was asking. Could we go if we wanted to, could we do it in peace, like others do it anywhere else in the world, or almost anywhere? Of course not, you were saying. But them, they're the ones who make the laws here and the ones who put us in jail. That's true, I said. Not only is there the problem of making it to the sea but also to the other side of the sea. To make it, you say, to make it somehow. Without their finding out that we're planning to leave. Them, them, I was saying. But for all that they keep watch, they can't keep track of everything; they can't, even if they live only for that, to watch over

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us, to check us at every moment, incessantly. Maybe you're right, you said. And as we were returning (it was best not to talk about it in the room) we finished rounding out the plan, the escape, the possibility, the attempt, but now that clever one has disappeared again, she's slipped away, sliding beneath the mud and excrement. Changing color, she's escaped me again. A shriek is heard in the crowd. A woman jumps hysterically as she puts her hands on her thighs. "An animal, an animal," she says, "an animal's gotten in here." And she keeps jumping up and down. Until she jumps out of her skirt. There she goes, fleeing again, changing color and trying to hide herself, the bitch, among the muddy shoes, bare feet, climbing up a thigh, leaping to a back, now sliding between stacks of sweaty necks, over a mob which falls back, forming a single mass on the ground. I pass over them too, I step on the face of somebody (a woman, a child, an old man, I don't know) without strength left to complain, and I follow, now crouched down, on all fours, sometimes raising an immense clamor of protests, kicked and shoved in turn, but watching her, following her, without losing sight, now up close. . . But they, in effect, yes, they were controlling everything, they did keep watch over everything, they did hear everything. They had foreseen everything. That's why they arrived so early. I came down from the garret hastily, thinking it was you. It was they. In that moment everything happened, happens, as if it had already happened. I had thought about it so many times (I had expected it), had calculated what could happen, so that now, when they enter, while they say to me, "Don't move. You're under arrest," and begin to search, I don't know, really, I don't know if everything is taking place in this instant or if it already took place, or if it's always taking place. Since it's such a miniature space, they don't have to spend much time searching. Two of them turn everything over up above in the garret, one stays with me, guarding me; the others feel around under the cushions, above the false roof, in the improvised closet. There they are, of course, the tires, the canvas, and something that I didn't even know you'd been able to get hold of (and now, worst of all), a compass. Quickly and minutely the search is concluded, in my

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presence, but without taking me into account. Papers, letters, books, the inner tubes, the canvas, and, of course, the compass, which I didn't even know that you had hidden in the closet, everything in these moments is an object, motive, body of the crime, cause for suspicion, for guilt. A photograph, a foreign sweater, arguments, for them convincing, too, parts of the same crime. Finally, they order me to take off my shoes, they take my footprint, they command me to get dressed completely again. "Let's go," one of them says to me, while he puts a hand at the back of my neck. So we leave. The hall is completely deserted now, although I know that they're all there, behind doors opened a crack, fearful, watching... A woman who had her eye knocked out by a stone, a man whose arm was crippled by a bullet, another with his swollen legs bursting, another woman who is squeezing her belly, shouting that she doesn't want to have a baby, because if she does, they'll take her out of here, another man who crawls along blindly because he lost his contact lenses. "Quiet, quiet, let's see if we can get the 'Voice of America.' " Shouts and more shouts calling for silence, but nobody keeps quiet, everybody has something to say, something to suggest, some solution, some complaint, some urgent business. "Let the Ambassador speak, let the Ambassador speak." But nobody is listening, everyone wants to be heard. "We're going to die of hunger, we're going to die of hunger. These sons of bitches want to starve us to death." Shouts and more shouts, me, too, shouting, yelling for you, pushing aside people more furious every moment, punching and moving forward, through the excrement, the urine, the crippled bodies and the uproar (outside, the shooting, again the shooting), looking for you... Nighttime, can it be night? Who can tell if it's night or day now... Nighttime, nighttime, it's nighttime. Now it's always nighttime. In the middle of this medieval tunnel and with an enormous light bulb, which is never turned off, above my head, of course it must be night all the time. Everyone reduced to the same uniform, the same shaved head, the same shout for the count-off three times a day. A day? Or a night? At least, if I could reach the window with its three sets of bars, I would know

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what it really is now, night, day, but in order to get near there you have to belong to the "leadership," to be one of the "pretty boys." Little by little they pass the time, it passes, or we pass, I am passing. It's not that I'm getting used to it, nor getting adapted, nor accepting it, but I go on surviving. Luckily, in the last visit you managed to bring in some books. Light is not lacking here. Silence, silence, yes, that's something that I almost can't remember. But the problem, you tell me, consists of bearing it, of surviving, of waiting. Luckily they didn't grab me in the room. At least I can bring you a few things. Here are some corn meal cakes, cookies, sugar, and more books. Time passes, time passes, you say. Time, I say, it passes?... It passes knowing that outside there are streets, trees, people with colorful clothing, and the sea. The visit ends. We say good-bye. To enter. Here's the worst moment. When in a blue line, scalped and escorted, we enter the tunnel, a long, thin stone vault which brings us, once again, to the circular cave that endlessly oozes bugs, mold, urine, those fumes, those fumes of accumulating, overflowing excrement, and that din, that constant shouting of the prisoners, that beating on the bunks and walls, that impotence, that caged up violence which has to get out somehow, to manifest itself, to explode. If, at least, I think, barricaded in the last bunk, they would kill each other in silence. But that din, that deafening and monotonous stamping, that cackling, that jargon which you have to pick up whether you want to or not, pick it up or perish. Ah, if somebody were interested in my soul, if somebody loved it forever, maybe, in exchange for it... But it's absolutely impossible to continue thinking, with that uproar, with that uproar which rises now and attacks... As if tormented by a strange plague, the trees have suddenly lost all their leaves, one at a time, like lightning, they've been torn off and devoured. Now, with their fingernails, with pieces of wire, kicking with their heels, everyone begins to tear the bark from the trunks; the roots, the grass, too, disappear. "Whoever has a piece of bread hidden away is risking his life," I hear somebody say. That's why I follow you, that's why, and even more than that. You are my goal, my salvation, my hope, my incentive,

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my love, my great, my only real true love. And now, once again you provoke an immense clamor when you climb into somebody's pants who had been sleeping on his feet, propped up by the crowd. "A buggering lizard," they shout, since in spite of everything, or because of everything, they keep a sense of humor. "No, it's queer," retorted someone else, "I scared it off just when it was coming up to my fly." "Maybe it's a real man," a woman is saying now, "since it went up my dress." "Grab it, grab it, it's fresh meat." And at the shout of that password, everybody springs at you. Letting out a howl, I cross over their heads. I won't let them, I won't let them, I won't let the others get you, even if they kill me (for now I see their hungry, delirious, crazy faces looking at me furiously), I keep on pushing them, making my way, pursuing you. "Food, food." The voice of alarm sounds. Screaming. Now everyone, forgetting about you, is trying to reach the fence where they, the police, so they say, are beginning to put little cardboard boxes with food rations along the fence. The chaos increases by the instant, for all that some people try to impose order. We hear that they're only passing out eight hundred little boxes for the ten thousand or so of us who are here. Punches, rioting again, shouting, for the first time they've saved me, they've saved us, you and me, so that now, with greater zeal, having an open field, I pursue you. I reach, at last I reach the place again that I hate so much, and yet long for: the improvised room. Now it all looks so dazzling. The deteriorating and unpainted walls shine; the wall of the other building seems like marble to me. I touch these improvised seats, this improvised stairway; all the rustic and scarce furnishings that surround me are, for me, something new that I look at, touch, I could say with a certain love. Five years in that cave, you say to me. Of course everything must seem to shine like new to you. And you also tell me what you suffered: investigations, persecutions, who knows what, but now we've got to forget everything and go on, you say. Now we'll be watched even more carefully, I say. That's why, you say, the best thing is to forget about escaping for a while. Pretend that you're adapting and don't say anything to anybody. Whenever you've got to get something off your

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chest, talk only to me. To the rest, not a word. All of this happened to us for not being cautious. Yes, I say, although I never spoke to anybody about the plan. But they're very cunning, you say, more than you can imagine. They may not have developed the production of shoes, food, or transportation, but as for persecution, they're first class. Don't forget it... I don't forget it, I don't forget it, how am I going to forget it... They're out there, some in uniform, others in civilian clothes, all armed, beating, running down, assassinating, those who, crouched in the trees, on the water tanks, on the empty houses, are trying to get closer, to make it to where we are. And now they, out there, put the boxes of food (a hard-boiled egg, a handful of rice) at their feet, on the other side of the fence. They're calm, looking at us here inside. When one of us stretches out an arm to take a box, they lift their feet and squash his hand, or they give him a smart kick in the chest. If somebody screams, then their laughter is louder, much louder than the screams. Others, more sadistic, or more refined, wait for one of us to take a box and when he's already bringing it inside, they beat him until his arm breaks. And fresh laughter is heard again. But you're neither among those who, pushing and kicking, have reached the fence, nor among those who now pull back their crushed and empty hands. Maybe you're up above, on top of the roof of the building, or inside, right in the building, with the Ambassador himself, tending the gravely wounded or the women with newborns, or the old. Yes, sure, that's where I should have gone first, that's why, because you're with the sick, or, sure, sick yourself, gravely ill, that's the reason why I haven't been able to find you. If not for that, you, sooner than I, would have found me. Back, back, to go back, to return through the shoving and kicking, to get back, to enter the building no matter how, back, back... I had reached it, I had reached that moment in which life not only lacks any meaning, but, moreover, we don't even ask ourselves if it ever had one, I say, referring to myself, of course. In a tone no less tragic for its grandiloquence, and in the middle of this dilapidated room. And I go on: because it's not even possible to be sad anymore. Even sadness itself is abolished by the noise, by

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the constant eruption of the cockroaches, the siren of the patrol cars, by the what will I eat today, what will I eat tomorrow. Yes, even sadness requires its space, at least, a little silence, a place where it can be kept, exhibited, taken out for an airing. In hell it isn't even possible to be sad. You simply live (you die) day by day, I say, I said. And you answered me: write, write all of this down, begin to write everything that you're suffering, starting right now, and you'll feel better. Really, I was thinking of doing that for a long time already, but what for? For you, for yourself, for the two of us, you say. And that's just how it is. Deliriously, angrily, constantly and in minute detail, I go on giving vent to my fear, my fury, my resentment, my hatred, my failure, our failure, our impotence, all the humiliations, swindles, tricks, and finally, simply, the punches, kicks, the constant harassment. Everything, everything. All the terror: on paper, on the white sheet, once filled, carefully hidden above the false roof of the garret, in the dictionaries, or behind the window: my revenge, my revenge. My triumph. *Jail to rot, jail to be shipwrecked and never to be able to float away, jail to give up, forgetting, not even conceiving that the sea existed, and, much less, the possibility of crossing it*... My triumph, my triumph, my revenge. Walks down streets that burst, since the pipes can't hold any more, between buildings you have to avoid so that they won't come down on top of you, between frowning faces that scrutinize and sentence us, between closed businesses, closed markets, closed theaters, closed parks, closed cafés, sometimes displaying signs (justifications) already dusty, CLOSED FOR RENOVATION, CLOSED FOR REPAIRS. What kind of repairs? When will the so-called repairs, the so-called renovation, be finished? When, at least, will they begin? Closed, closed, closed. Everything closed... I arrive, I open the innumerable padlocks, I go running up the improvised stairway. Here she is, waiting for me. I uncover her, pulling back the canvas, and I contemplate her dusty and cold dimensions. I wipe off the dust and run my hand over her again. With light strokes of the hand I clean her back, her base, her sides. I sit down, desperate, happy, at her side, before her, I move my hands over her keyboard, and, quickly, everything is set in

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motion. The ta ta, the ringing, the music begins, little by little, then more quickly, now at full speed. Walls, trees, streets, cathedrals, faces and beaches, cells, minicells, large cells, starry night, bare feet, pines, clouds, hundreds, thousands, a million parakeets, stools and a climbing vine, everything approaches, everything arrives, all are coming. The walls expand, the roof disappears, and, naturally, you are floating, floating, floating, torn up, dragged along, elevated, carried, transported, memorialized, saved, on altars, and, by that miniscule and constant cadence, by that music, by that incessant ta ta... My revenge, my revenge. My triumph... Bodies armored in excrement, children sinking in excrement, hands that search in shit, turning it over and over. Hands and more hands, round, thin, plump, bony, face up, face down, joined, spread out, closing into fists, scratching heads, testicles, arms, backs, clapping, rising up, crawling, falling faint, black, yellow, brown, white, transparent, tightly clenched and pale from days and days of hunger, swollen, mangled, mutilated by the beating when they tried to get hold of a little box of rations on the other side of the fence, where the patrol cars are now circling constantly, carrying loudspeakers that don't stop blaring menacingly for an instant. "Anyone who wishes to take refuge with the Cuban authorities may do so and return to his home." And day and night, day and night, the shooting, the thirst, the threats, the hunger, the beatings. And now, suddenly, the rainstorm, the torrent of rain, pacifying the dust, fusing trees, automobiles, country homes, and military units, soldiers stationed, barricaded, in a state of alert all around us... The typical spring shower, unexpected, torrential. Some people try to protect themselves with their hands; others, lowering their heads, huddle up, wanting to crouch down, to take shelter inside themselves. Many who sleep, continue sleeping, while the water runs over their foreheads, their faces, their closed eyes, without managing to wake them up. Others attempt to bend down, to protect themselves underneath the rest, causing an avalanche of protest, of remonstrances, and some kick or other shot out at random. I take advantage of the confusion, the state of near calm, of immobile stacking which the shower is causing

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in order to make my way, scrutinizing the drenched faces, the contracted and drenched bodies, shaken by contractions and trembling, and I go on, I go on examining them, looking at them, deciphering the streaming faces, searching for you. I know that you're around here somewhere, one step away from me, perhaps, that you must be here. "They want to break us through hunger, illness, terror, this storm is surely their doing too, one of their tricks," says a woman, gone mad in the downpour, as she makes signs, crosses in the air and strange gestures... And I return, full of fuel, arguments, fear. I run, I go up the sordid stairway, I open the innumerable padlocks. Burning, I climb up to the improvised garret. My treasure, my treasure. I look for my treasure which I'm going to enlarge right now, my revenge, my triumph which has gone on growing thicker, and now it's not one, not ten, nor a hundred pages, but hundreds. Hundreds of sheets stolen from sleep, from terror, from rest, from fear, slugged out in the heat, in the noise of the streets, of the neighbors; won, striking out against the mosquitos, against the pestilential vapor (vapors) that rises, that falls, that arrives from every floor, from everywhere. Thousands of sheets won from the shrieks of sinister infants who seem to have settled a tacit accord to erupt in their demonical uproar whenever I sit down before the keyboard. Pages and more pages conquered with furious blows of the fist, the feet, the head, struggling furiously against television, record players, portable radios, cars without mufflers, shrieks, leaps, the scraping of pots, inopportune visits, figures, bodies, almost unavoidable, constant black-outs... Tapping, tapping in the darkness, quickly, quickly, each moment more quickly, tapping, tapping, before they return, quickly, quickly, triumphantly, triumphantly, in the darkness... And new disturbances, lights, bulbs, signal flares, that break out now on all sides, illuminating Fifth Avenue, the whole area, in such a way that it's as if it were high noon. Somebody, the driver of a rented Chevy has managed to break through the barriers, the three cordons, and has just smashed into the Ambassador's own car, which had been standing parked at the entrance, at an extraordinary speed. At last the man gets out of the wrecked

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car; he begins to crawl, injured, toward the fence, where all of us are watching him; slowly, grabbing onto the grass, he continues creeping. Then the official cars move in, focusing on him, the soldiers, lanterns in hand, are also encircling him, as they shine their lights on him, members of the three cordons, soldiers, judo experts, police, making a circle around him, allowing him to continue crawling. The driver almost reaches the fence now, where everyone, including me, stares at him. Finally, when his hands are already touching the wire fence, they, tightening the circle of lights, advance slowly, aiming at him. Two of them bend down and, taking him by the belt and the shirt, they lift him in the air and carry him away. He, looking at us, opens and closes his mouth, but says nothing, nothing is heard, although there is total silence in these moments... Nothing, nothing, there's nothing, not one sheet, not the smallest trace of a sheet, not even the last one, the one that was still unfinished in the typewriter. I turn over the drawers, the mattress, the drapes, the improvised seats, I tear down the false roof, the covering of the improvised stairway; with methodical dread the books are examined, shaken out. But nothing. Of the hundreds and hundreds of scribbled pages, not a clue remains, not a hint as to how they disappeared... Them, them, of course, them, you tell me, while I, giving up, stop turning over the junk. Of course they're the ones, you continue. Then they'll come to arrest me, I say. Maybe yes, maybe no, you tell me, as worried as I am, although trying to hide it, trying, even without arguments, to cheer me up, to console me. Maybe they won't come, you say. Everything was in order, I say, they didn't knock anything over. How could they have gotten in? Don't be naïve, what can't they do? They run the country, they run all of us, they know every move you make, what we say, and, maybe, even what we think. Don't you get it? That's what they've done it for: so that you'll know that they know. Don't you realize that precisely what they want is for you to realize it? for us to understand that we're in their hands, that we've got no escape? that just the way they took those papers, without anybody (not even you) finding out, they can simply eliminate you? And you'll appear strangled, hung, a suicide or dead of natural causes—a heart

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attack, a collapse, who knows, however they want—and the door and the room and everything will be intact, perfectly neat, in order. And maybe even a letter will appear, drawn up in your handwriting, signed by your hand, your farewell... He stops talking. For a moment the two of us remain stooped over the heap of overturned books. Now he takes a blank piece of paper, a random sheet, and he slowly lifts it to his lips, chewing it as if it were a blade of grass. Then you tell me, now in a very low voice: I don't think they'll come looking for you, for us. This was only a demonstration, a subtle bluff. In short, a proof of their cunning, their power, their control... And now, what are we going to do? I say. To play the game, you say, even lower. Listen up: to play the game or perish. Let's turn ourselves around, you say to me now in a whisper. Later, between the two of us we'll arrange everything... And we leave... That's how it was, at that point, as it had been for years, at that place, at that extreme, his hand lying on the improvised stairway, his eyes contemplating the narrow panorama, the four improvised seats, the embedded mirror (in that moment the noise of the nearest radio became intolerable), but he stayed that way, at that extreme, at that border, at that point, in that sort of unending recollection of a repetition, cautiously stooped over, looking at the panorama which stopped abruptly only two paces away: the deteriorating wall of the building alongside and the old closed door which faced the hallway where now somebody, or a group, is clamoring noisily for the elevator that never goes up. They shout and pound. But what a way of pounding on the old artifact, the skeleton, the cage, which, of course, doesn't move. Elevator! Elevator! And the pounding follows, just the same. Again, again, elevator! And the cackling, the uproar continue, everything gives signs of noise, but nothing gives signs of life... So, thinking, commenting in a low voice, protesting, ironizing, sometimes, very cautiously, certifying his existence only when he was outside of the room, in an open and desolated space, the Malecón, an empty street, a field, and looking, the two of them, cautiously, in all directions. Because now as his friend, his only friend, had told him, it wasn't only a matter of suffering, but of praising out loud all that was suffered, of shouting

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support of all the horror, not writing against it, or on the margins, but in favor, unconditionally, and to leave the sheets, as if carelessly, on the improvised table, in an evident but discreet place, in case they came in. And the two of them, in the evenings, in a natural, normal voice, not very loud, so that they weren't going to think that they were doing it facetiously (they're very clever, very clever, the other used to say), they discussed the "advantages," the "successes," the "nobility" of the system, the constant "progress." The newspaper, *Granma*, was read out loud. But not so loud, please, that they can think that we're fooling around. The premier of the latest Soviet film, *The Great Patriotic War*! (was it that one?), *A Man of Truth*! (could it be that?), *Moscow, You Are My Love*! (that?): how marvelous, how many positive aspects, a true gem . . . But no, not so loud, please, that they can suspect, that they can realize that we're fooling. *We Are Soviet Men*! Lower, lower. *They Fought for the Fatherland*! . . . Quiet, keep quiet. *The Ballad of the Russian Soldier*! Sssh. And to applaud. At the auditorium, on the corner, in the square, while we watch how they watch us with that gaze of disdain and distrust, or with the ironic faces of braggarts, for never, never are they going to admit to being satisfied, even when from so much pretending you forget your true face, who you are, your role . . . But now, in this moment, when you had just gotten out of bed a few minutes ago and were descending half-dressed down the improvised, vertical stairway headed toward the improvised plumbing of that improvised hole, standing thus, hunched between the garret and the ground floor, now, thus, suddenly, he was struck by the certainty (once more, yes, but always renewed) that he could not make it to the bathroom anymore (that box), nor take another step (through that trash), rather he couldn't even move a hand from one step to another (since whether going down or up the improvised stairway it was necessary to support oneself with one's hands, too). So, unmoving, in that position, he was looking, not at the past, nor the future (what was that?), he was looking at the rotting planks, some stain (could it be humidity?) on the wall, and, at last, suddenly, although now without being surprised, at his own

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face reflected in the mirror. And an infinite inertia invaded him to the sound of that pot (could it be the people upstairs? could it be the people downstairs? could it be those from in front?) being scraped furiously. And in that noise, completely undone and impotent, he felt that he was finally dissolving, becoming paralyzed, disappearing, no longer feigning a defeat in order to pull himself together later, to gain time, to go on, but rather he was simply defeated, liquidated. It was then—in this moment—that they knocked at the door. It was he, his friend who was knocking, as he always did and who was entering then, since naturally he had the keys to all the padlocks. Shutting the door, he came closer to him until he put his lips to his ear. You haven't heard yet? he said to him. About what? People are entering the Peruvian Embassy. They withdrew the guards since yesterday. They say that the place is already full. I'm going over there. Let's go, I told him. No, you said. Wait. They've got too much on you. I'll go first to see what's going on. And if it's true that there's no surveillance, I'll come and get you. Wait for me here. And he left. But he didn't remain standing any longer on the improvised stairway. He had to do something: to get dressed, to wait. And I waited the whole day, from noon until nearly dusk. People were running through the hall, sneaking, trying not to make noise, something they had never tried to avoid, even the radios were turned off. I open the door, I go down the stairway. Nobody is talking on the street, but somehow everyone seems to communicate with each other. I hurry to catch a bus headed toward the Embassy. The bus is more crowded than ever, which is difficult to imagine. Almost all of them are young. Some of them even discuss their plans openly: to enter the Embassy quickly. Before they close it. They're sure to close it any minute, says somebody beside me. The problem is to get there, the other replies. And not to leave, because not only are they making a file on anyone who leaves, but they also start kicking him and take him away to prison. And they keep talking. Now I know why you didn't return. I've been an idiot. I should have realized before that if you didn't come it was because it was impossible. And you must have thought that if you didn't return, I wasn't going to be such a

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shithead that I would stay in the room. Quickly, now the problem is to enter quickly. And to find you, to meet you quickly before it occurs to you to leave to look for me and they take you prisoner, if they haven't already. And everything is my fault, idiot, idiot. Quickly, quickly, since I'm sure you're waiting for me, that it hasn't occurred to you to leave, that you've thought, logically, that when you couldn't return, I would come to see what was happening... In droves, through the shower of rocks, the dust, and the shooting, they're entering, we're entering. All kinds of people. Some I know or at least have seen before, but now we greet each other euphorically, in a communion of mutual sincerity, never manifested before, as if we were old and dear friends. People and more people, from Santo Suarez, from Old Havana, from El Vedado, from every neighborhood, people and more people, especially young people, hopping the fence, dodging or receiving blows, running amidst the shooting and the din of the loudspeakers and the sirens of the patrol cars, entering, jumping now in a terrified parade, between kicks in the ass, shots, bodies that roll over and fall, a woman who drags a child by the arms, an old man who tries to open a path for himself with his cane. Everyone in an incredible throng, jumping over the railings, the gate, filling the gardens, the trees, even the roof of the Embassy building. So, in the immense dust cloud, between hands that push and shove, amid shrieks, threats, explosions, forming a single almost impenetrable mass, we manage still to get past the security which becomes stronger every minute, and we jump, we enter, we fall into the crowd that can hardly move, here, on the other side of the fence, surrounded already by a circle of official vehicles, and patrol cars which keeps getting thicker, Alfa-Romeos, Yuguly, Volgas, the whole administrative class, the high civilian and military officials have arrived in their shiny new cars to see, to contain, to repress, to try by any means to suppress this spectacle. And, as if that weren't enough, they just blocked up the entrances of the streets that lead to the Embassy with cars and barriers, and they've dispersed, everyone knows it, thousands and thousands of soldiers in civilian clothing throughout the

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area to keep anyone else from reaching here. Now a motorcycle cop is braking violently in front of the military cordon surrounding the Embassy. "Sons of bitches!" he shouts at us. And he takes out his pistol. Here we all retreat as much as we can, trying to move away from the fence. The cop, pistol in hand, comes up to it. He takes a leap and falls to the other side, next to us. With great speed he takes off his uniform, wraps his pistol in it and throws the whole bundle over the fence, to the other side, where they are. Here, inside, applause is heard, shouts of "*Viva*!" The cordon that surrounds us is tripled. It begins to get dark. Here the uproar we're making reaches such dimensions that even the din and the shooting from outside can't be heard at times. "They're going to machine-gun us, they're going to machine-gun us," a woman shouts suddenly. And the mass, we, attempt to retreat anew. The trees disappear, the roof of the building disappears. Everything is no more than a moving anthill, people who clamber, people who cling, who cling even tighter to one another. Screaming. Some who fall wounded. Now there is a general panic, because somebody really is firing at us here, inside. But that's not what I continue watching or dodging. I make my way, I go back, because I have to find you; I have to locate you, to reach you, wherever you are. In the middle of this terrorized crowd, hardly able to move, and now almost completely night, I must find you, so that you'll see that I came, too, that I had the courage to make it, that I didn't stay behind, that they couldn't annihilate me—annihilate us—completely, and that here I am, here we are, trying again, anew. The two of us. *Alive*, still *alive*... That's why it doesn't bother me now to step on this human mass which seems to be sleeping now, here, in the very entrance of the residence, maybe, surely, you're inside. This is the last place to check, and here you must be, without a doubt, ill. The commission for maintaining order attempts to stop me, but I push them aside and go on. People stretched out on the floor, old people, women in labor, new-born babies, the sick, in short those who need to be here, under a roof. And I go on, I go on looking for you, opening rooms, cubicles, pavillions, or whatever the hell this place is called. "Hey," a half-naked woman

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says to me now, "get lost, the Ambassador will be furious, they've eaten up everything including his parrot"... But I keep on searching all the little compartments. I push that door where two bodies are rolling around incredibly. I go up to them, I separate them mechanically and look at their faces, which stare at me disconcertedly. And I leave. "It's unbelievable," says an old man with his legs bandaged provisionally in some rags, "to feel like screwing when we've spent two weeks without anything to eat"... I leave, again I cross the sea of people, people who are collapsing already, or who can hardly hold themselves up, staggering, propping each other up and after all that, when they finally pass out, they don't reach the ground, because the ground doesn't exist. Covering the earth, the shit, the piss, are the feet, everybody's feet, feet standing on other feet sometimes, a single foot sometimes supporting the whole body. So, through that immense jungle of feet that are trying to crawl along, I crawl along. I go on, pursuing you. You're not going to escape me. You're not going to escape me. Don't think, you bitch, that you're going to escape me. Now, less than ever. Now that nobody even pays attention to you since they can hardly look at anything, yes, now you won't escape me, and I follow, I follow behind her, who (the clever one) is now running toward the fence, toward the outside. But I continue, day and night, scrutinizing the faces. You could be one of them. Is it you? Will you be one of them? Hunger makes faces change. Hunger can make our own brothers unrecognizable. Maybe you're looking for me and you don't recognize me. God knows how many times we may have met, looking for one another without recognizing each other. Really, will we still be able to recognize each other? Quickly, quickly, for with each passing moment, we'll be more disfigured, we'll be less able to find, to discover, to recognize each other. That's why it's best to shout. Loud. Really loud. Above those damned loudspeakers. As loud as possible. Calling you. But how, then, if I shout, am I going to hear when you call me? I shout, I keep quiet for a moment, waiting for your answer and I shout again. Even though we may not recognize one another, we have to hear each other. To hear our names, our calls. And, finally, to

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identify each other... So I keep advancing and shouting in the tumult which now convulses once again. "Food, food, they're handing out food," they shout. And again the crowd, finding energy from I don't know where, advances toward the fence. The same rite, the same kicking. "They're going to knock down the fence," somebody shouts. "If they knock it down we won't be on Peruvian territory anymore." But the tumult is really uncontainable. Who can get through in the middle of that chaos? But I make an attempt, I, too, push and hurl myself through the punches, slaps, kicks. Pushing faces and bodies which roll aside, I continue toward the far end. Now I'm sure that I'll be able to find you, yes, you must be there, alongside the fence, as an intelligent person like you would logically be, ready to grab the first thing they hand out, to hear the first thing they say, to retreat before the first danger. I should have thought of it. Of course you have to be there. So, pushing, kicking, biting, crawling through the web of bodies which are crawling too, I make it to the fence, I grab onto the wire. There's nobody who's gonna tear me away from here, shit, nobody's gonna get me off o' here, I shout, and I begin to look at the faces of all those who manage to reach there. But you're not among them either, those who, risking their lives, like me, are climbing up the wire fence. I look again and again at those desperate faces, but none of them, I know, is yours. Bleeding hands that don't want to let go of the wire, but they aren't yours. Defeated, I stop looking at the fence, and I look through it, toward the outside, where they are, fed, bathed, armed, in uniforms or plain clothes, now preparing to "serve" us the food. And I discover you, finally I discover you. There you are, with them, outside, uniformed and armed. Talking, making gestures, laughing and conversing with someone, also young, also uniformed and armed. I turn to contemplate you again while they begin, you begin, to pass out the little boxes of food. Now they (you) approach from all sides, all along the fence. The gun in one hand, the little box in the other. The distribution begins. The clamoring and the pushing of those who are next to me are worse than ever. They crush me, they want to crush me, they want to stand on me to get one of those filthy

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boxes that they're passing out. Idiot, idiot, I say to myself while they trample me, climbing up over my body, using me as a trampoline, as an elevation, as a promontory, to raise themselves up a little and desperately stretch their hands over the fence. Idiot, idiot, I say to myself; and while they are all walking over me, standing on top of me, jumping over me, I begin to laugh wildly, as if all those feet, all those hooves covered with shit and filth were tickling me... "This guy's gone crazy," somebody says. "Leave him alone, he could be dangerous," says another. And they start moving away getting down off my body. Outside, laughing also, they methodically distribute the boxes of food all along the fence. They stand next to it and wait for somebody to stick out his hand to stomp on it with their feet... I could, right now, stretch out my arm and get that box. Anyway, even if I get stomped on or kicked in the chest, I won't die of hunger. But don't let them think that I'm going to give them that pleasure. Don't think I'm going to make you happy, don't let them believe, don't you believe, that I'm going to eat that shit, that filth, that swill. And much less let you step on my hand in exchange for a hard-boiled egg. For that reason, just so they won't have the pleasure, I stay this way without moving, triumphant, looking at them (at you), outside there, carting that filth back and forth. I'm looking at them this way and laughing, while desperate arms are waving over my head. Then I discover you, I see you for the first time, there, also outside, fleeing from a shiny boot, running, crawling stealthily along the asphalt, and entering, what a coincidence, here, in the riot, where we are. Here she comes, here she comes, there she goes, almost drowsy now, with hardly any energy left to keep fleeing, but still moving, beneath the bodies, over the hands and faces which barely blink when she crosses over them. She's had it now. She can't go on anymore after so many hours of trying to escape me. And now, she stops as if stunned, with her mouth open on top of somebody's shoulder, who's lying face down on the ground, trying desperately to leap somewhere... At last I've got you, bitch, yes, now, though you're covered with filth, you've got no escape.

Translated from the Spanish by Andrew Bush

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Five Poems by Gerald Stern

The Red Coal

Sometimes I sit in my blue chair trying to remember
what it was like in the spring of 1950
before the burning coal entered my life.

I study my red hand under the faucet, the left one
below the grease line consisting of four feminine angels
and one crooked broken masculine one

and the right one lying on top of the white porcelain
with skin wrinkled up like a chicken's
beside the razor and the silver tap.

I didn't live in Paris for nothing and walk
with Jack Gilbert down the wide sidewalks
thinking of Hart Crane and Apollinaire

and I didn't save the picture of the two of us
moving through a crowd of stiff Frenchmen
and put it beside the one of Pound and Williams

unless I wanted to see what coals had done
to their lives too. I say it with vast affection,
wanting desperately to know what the two of them

talked about when they lived in Pennsylvania
and what they talked about at St. Elizabeth's

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fifty years later, looking into the sun,

40,000 wrinkles between them,
the suffering finally taking over their lives.
I think of Gilbert all the time now, what

we said on our long walks in Pittsburgh, how
lucky we were to live in New York, how strange
his great fame was and my obscurity,

how we now carry the future with us, knowing
every small vein and every elaboration.
The coal has taken over, the red coal

is burning between us and we are at its mercy—
as if a power is finally dominating
the two of us; as if we're huddled up

watching the black smoke and the ashes;
as if knowledge is what we needed and now
we have that knowledge. Now we have that knowledge.

The tears are different—though I hate to speak
for him—the tears are what we bring back to the
darkness, what we are left with after our

own escape, what, all along, the red coal had
in store for us as we moved softly,
either whistling or singing, either listening or reasoning,

on the grey sidewalks and the green ocean;
in the cars and the kitchens and the bookstores;
in the crowded restaurants, in the empty woods and
libraries.

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Here I Am Walking

Here I am walking between Ocean and Neptune
sinking my feet in mile after mile of wet life.
I am practically invisible
in the face of all this clutter,
either straying near the benches over the buried T-shirts
or downhill in the graveyard
where the burned families are sleeping in the sun
or eating dry lunch among the corpses.
I will finish walking in two hours
and eat my sandwich in the little park
beside the iron Methodist.
This is the first step.
Tomorrow I will start again in Barnegat
and make my way towards Holgate or Ventnor.
This is something different
than it was even five years ago.
I have a second past to rake over
and search through—another 2,000 miles of seashore
to account for.
—I am still making my mind up
between one of those art deco hotels
in Miami Beach, a little back room on a court
where you could almost be in Cuba or
Costa Rica of the sweet flesh; and
a wooden shack in one of the mosquito marshes
in Manahawkin or the Outer Banks.
I am planning my cup of tea
and my sweet biscuit,
or my macaroni soup
and my can of sardines.
If I spent the morning washing shirts
I would read for two hours
before I slept through the afternoon.
If I walked first, or swam,
I might feel like writing down words

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before I went in for coffee, or more hot water.
I will sit on the black rocks
to make my connections,
near the small basin of foam.
I will look at the footprints
going in and out of the water
and dream up a small blue god to talk to.
I will be just where I was
twenty-five years ago,
breathing in salt,
snorting like a prophet,
turning over the charred wood;
just where I was then,
getting rid of baggage,
living in dreams,
finding a way to change, or sweeten, my clumsy life.

My Hand

I have put my hand in a baby shepherd's mouth
and watched him whine with pleasure.
I have seen him roll on his back
with his white stomach facing the sun
and paw helplessly.
I think he is full of some low form of love,
something that Dante would have pitied
as he moved from heaven to heaven,
something akin to the drowned buttercup
or the red woodpecker swinging on his bag of fat.
There would be a crease at the corner of Dante's eye,
a roundness in his cheek,
that is for that animal alone;
a tiny sign
interrupting his climbing and his falling,
his concentration on justice and liberation.

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St. Patrick's Day, 1979

I'm dreaming of the dahlias up there on the radiator
starting to grow leaves
and the jade plant getting a little fatter
and a little thicker every day.
I am the man with the rake, bent over with
emotional neck pains, standing in my yard getting
ready to be a garden advisor and a river prophet.

It's freezing—which is what peas like—and every
bird within half a mile is grating its beak
and foolishly chirping and coughing and whistling, half
off-key.
I have to make up my mind whether to look
back upstairs at the jade plant and the thick
white rag pulling it back in place or at the
sparkling river carrying everything—good and bad—
with it downhill to Trenton and Philadelphia,
fifty miles beyond my graveyard and my roaring spillway.

This spring song is for the drunks in New York;
and the Chinese witch hazel;
and the crow in New Jersey;
and the dying maple;
and the trellis and the rake and the shovel
and the small packet of new snap peas.

It is for the loud wind, and the clear shadows,
and the white cardboard and the red pen.
It is for the poet bent over his rows
digging up huge chunks of dirt,
bowing and dancing like a white pigeon on Spring Street,
singing again about buried love and crazy renewal.

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Dear Mole

Dear mole, I have forgotten you!
Living under the dahlias, making highways
under the pines, coming up to sniff
blindly, like John Ruskin,
at the pink chrysanthemums and the red berries
hanging from the ruined viburnum.

Everything depends on your sponginess,
the world you created with your
shoulders and claws,
the long tunnels and the quiet rooms
where you can wander—like Ruskin—
dreaming of smooth floors and vaulted ceilings.

He was like you,
always cramming and ramming, spluttering in disgust,
hating repression, living apart from others,
adoring mountains, drifting with the vortices,
hemorrhaging a little,
loving high sounds, loving the crystal orders.

He was like you,
following the laws of the fourteenth century,
envious of the fish,
curiously breathless and obsessed with shadows,
loving small girls, living deep in Hell,
always beginning, always starting over,
his head down, his poor soul warbling and wailing.

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Two Poems by Joyce Carol Oates

Thimble-sized Soul

—with only the cavernous house as a witness.

It nudges you from your shallow sleep,
it whispers love-mockeries.

An aching socket that must be filled.

Each of the rooms, it seems,
is clamoring for you!—and again you are a bride
of the house, a sleepwalker.

Slugs, flame-quick roosters, reptiles with smiling tongues,
the benign faces of strangers
appear at your windows.
But no danger this morning:
the empty house protects you.

Alone, the thimble-soul begins to speak.
It whispers *Help me*, it complains *I cannot breathe*,
there is reproach in its tone
as, kicked, it flies clattering
beneath the bed.

Alone in the house you scrape
a fingernail against a wall, idly
and listen for the breath of the house.
Nothing that is familiar,
nothing you might reasonably love.
Are these regions yours? Are you theirs?
Would you die for them?
Will only catastrophe release you?

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First Dark

First dark. The exuberance of the night.
Insects in their music.
Their razor-ribbons of noise.

First dark, and a child's distant shouting.
Someone rolls an empty barrel along a lane.

Green wet air, close as a breath.
My feet are damp, my fingers snatch at weed-flowers
drowsy with pollen.
It is long ago. Nothing has happened until now.

At the pond the young frogs leap with their new legs,
small yelps of green. Sheer emerald.
You can't imagine. You can't exaggerate
that green.
Or the surprise of the yelps and leaps.
The way they disappear one by one into the pond
as you approach.
Small emeralds of alarm,
quick terror.

I am prowling, my feet are damp.
I am snatching at things to save my life.
Wait! Where are you going!
That child whom I never saw except in snapshots,
and could not love,
where are you going? Has anything happened until now?

How small the soul, cupped in a child's hand.
Held over the pocked water,
ready to leap and sink and disappear.

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Two Poems by Paul Zweig

The Danger

This morning I killed more wasps
Than I could count.
My thumb jammed on the spray-can,
And they plummeted from the rafters,
From the cheap rippled glass
Of the kitchen pane, until a striped carpet
Jerked over the floor, or lay curled and still,
Like hailstones of bruised velvet.
I don't pity them.
Alive, they sizzled in my hair,
And stung me. Even their nest
Over the kitchen door, a grey loaf
Milled of wasp-glue and straw,
Resembled a shaped and frightening mist.
When I churned my broomhandle into
It cautiously, a chaff of wing-wisps
Fluttered to the floor, like aircrash victims.

Now squads of ants are towing them away.
A lingering spray-smell
Says it is dangerous here to have wings,
Crawl, knit webs.

I sit in the imperfect shade of an old walnut tree,
And hear the harmless zinging of flies,
A tractor's frayed sound rising
From the rich valley fields. It is quiet now.
The afternoon smells of baked dust and marigolds.
Yet somehow, those heavy-bellied wasps stumbling
Over the kitchen floor, stay with me.
Their inaudible rage whines in my ear:

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A ghost of our morning's combat.

It is a trill of danger that will not go away.
I hear it in field-flowers perking
From the lush stubble, in moss-furred
Foundation-stones of the house.
I hear it in me: something I can almost see
Crawling monstrously; its sizzling hum,
The long fuse that will detonate the world.

This morning I swept them into a heap,
Yet their stings swarm in the glue of me.
My own breathing scares me, and the precarious daylight
Has been hollowed by their knife-like wings.

Snow

Love is all we could manage, its particles
Floating from the hard rim of the air.
Our tracks were clear as a book
In the fresh chance heaven threw behind us.
And the pain went on searching
Behind your face, the snow went on falling.

Once I felt your tongue
Work so gently into my brain,
It took root in the mind-dark
And branched forth again as song.

Character is a failure of love,
And I want to love you this morning.
I want to love the birch trunks
Invisible against the snow,
And your hand fishing warmly in my pocket.
I want to love the darkening blue at the sky's edge,
Our thoughts like mittens fumbling to hold on,
Our breath-smoke warming the air
Before it dissolves into a hard February day.

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Three Poems by Heather McHugh

Intensive Care

*

As if intensity were a virtue we say
good and. Good and drunk. Good and dead.
What plural means is everything
that multiplying greatens, as if two
were more like ninetynine than one,
or one were more like zero than
like anything. As if
you loved me, you will leave me.

**

You (are the man who) made
roadmaps to the ovaries
upon his dinner napkin.
I('m the woman who) always forgot
where she was—in a state,
in a sentence. Absently stirring
my alphabet soup, I remember
childhood's clean white calendar
and blueprint of the heart.

***

As if friends were to be saved
we are friends. We talk to ourselves,
go home at the same time.
As if beds were to be made
not born in, as if love
were just heredity

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we know the worst, we fear
the known. Today we were bad
and together; tonight
we'll be good and alone.

North Island Songs

*

The water that made the island
murdered the men. You can't expect
these moons to last, these fallen
roses, rising gold. You can't believe
in pure decor or easy virtue.
People are dying for good.

*

He wants other women,
those who never leave
well enough alone.
He's well enough.

At a distance I gather
what is going on. The dark
that fills the deep is the song
they hear in hulls.

*

If I pine and croon I am no woman
in my hooked heart, if I lie
then maybe I can take a shine
and still keep cool. In its own element

that tough old bird the gull
hauls across the last-chance bars

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and flashy waterfront its evening
seine of wail.

*
The dance turns out to be
a woodfire, fellows from the factory and mill,
a cop in the doorway looking nowhere,
and a kid to stamp our hands. The band
is bored by the third song and the man I'd like
to love is drunk asleep in the corner, so
I plunge out the storm door to the cars and there

the stars are out. Orion perfectly
speared by a pine tree. Moon exactly
sharpened to a shade of meaning, o
I can think then
cold and clear, imagine
why the inland people call
some kinds of water kill.

Inside

In the field is a house of wood.
A window of the house contains
the field. You can't see far

with a sun in the sky, with a living-room
lamp at night. Locality is all
you light, and you, as single as a bed.

But there's no end to dark. The bed
is in the clearing and the clearing
in the wind; the world is a world

among others. With the stroke of midnight,
blind, a man could make
the stars inside my cell begin to split.

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Reginald Gibbons

Affidavit

I came out of what was not my mother.
When my eyes cracked in the light,
and I looked up, it was at a germ-lamp,
a bulb that disinfected as it shone.

Over me rode my father's head commanding—
I have learned—a body that was not his.
He never told me where they got it,
only that he had been left-handed, before.

In school I was trained to work
twenty years, and to like that work, and then
to come to dislike it and quit. They have
solved the problem of employment in this way.

At last my mother decided it was enough.
She ratified (that's the word
we use) her dream by refusing the treatment
and the alternative. For that too she was trained.

A desert is growing inside us, she said at the end.
It's true that red rock is our principal icon:
blood, rust, the mythical rose—these color
the meditation in the aluminum shrine.

Yet we continue to eat and sleep; we drink
a variety of wines. To discover wherein

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the germ of our culture lies preserved
is the great task of our researchers.

But they have solved the problem of the life
of the mind this way—for though wood
is rationed, we may use it, and knowing whence
the ancient flame leapt up, we have wondered.

I came out of what was not my mother
and when I first drew breath
it was in the room where the cow had been.
Its womb, its bone, its milk, were mine

till it turned to a kind of ash in my throat,
and a hunk of flesh on the point of a knife.

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Carol Conroy

The Jewish Furrier Explains The Search For Beauty

Remember where I came from.
Think of a continent of sabled czars.
Leave your home. Let exile fill your mouth
like the lost language of the child.
Understand the reason.
A man who would not wear
the cloth coat of persecution.
A Jew. A people born to fur.

One afternoon in a slow season
you place the perfect growth of Russian minks
on the narrow shoulders of a woman.
Her mother died in Buchenwald.

In the dream I see my sister dressed in cloth,
the sister who stayed to wear a shroud;
some days I cover her with fur.

And when the weeping comes, let it be Jewish weeping.
The grief of the furrier alone with the fitch.
And when the laughter comes, let it be Jewish laughter.
Twelve bearded elders rocking on their heels.

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Robert Pinsky

The Saving

Though the sky still was partly light
Over the campsite clearing
Where some men and boys sat eating
Gathered near their fire,
It was full dark in the trees,
With somewhere a night-hunter
Up and out already to pad
Unhurried after a spoor,
Pausing maybe to sniff
At the strange, lifeless aura
Of a dropped knife or a coin
Buried in the spongy duff.

Willful, hungry and impatient,
Nose damp in the sudden chill,
One of the smaller, scrawnier boys
Roasting a chunk of meat
Pulled it half-raw from the coals,
Bolted it whole from the skewer
Rubbery gristle and all,
And started to choke and strangle—
Gaping his helpless mouth,
Struggling to retch or to swallow
As he gestured, blacking out,
And felt his father lift him

And turning him upside down
Shake him and shake him by the heels,
Like a woman shaking a jar—
And the black world upside-down,
The upside-down fire and sky,
Vomited back his life,

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And the wet little plug of flesh
Lay under him in the ashes.
Set back on his feet again
In the ring of faces and voices,
He drank the dark air in,
Snuffling and feeling foolish

In the fresh luxury of breath
And the brusque, flattering comfort
Of the communal laughter. Later,
Falling asleep under the stars,
He watched a gray wreath of smoke
Unfurling into the blackness;
And he thought of it as the shape
Of a newborn ghost, the benign
Ghost of his death, that had nearly
Happened: it coiled, as the wind rustled,
And he thought of it as a power,
His luck or his secret name.

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American Dad

Tama Janowitz

My mother and I had decided that Bobo, with his lack of imagination, his logical, literal mind, would be best off operating and removing parts of other people—not a psychiatrist like his dad but a doctor nevertheless. Bobo seemed amiable to the constant suggestions that he apply for medical school, that while an undergraduate he take the right pre-med courses. "After all," I said to him helpfully, "Ma and I are expecting you to support us, your feeble brother and aged mother." But now that my mother had a job for the spring term, or at least thought that she did, she was much happier and more relaxed. At least she would not have to count on either of her children for support for a short while yet. "And," she said to me, "often one job leads to the next." She was anxious to begin saving money to buy a new car—she had owned her present one, a huge, six-cylinder station wagon, for almost twelve years. It plodded and groaned like a monster; it was ready to give up and be put to sleep out of its misery, but my mother would not let it alone, could not afford to. She had no choice

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but to keep pushing it, have its insides cleaned, parts changed and jazzed up.

My mother was a genius, that much was true. But what a genius! I often told her she would go on record as being the dumbest genius alive. An amazing Guinness World Record. "Even Einstein," I told her, "learned to tie his shoes eventually." Anyone could take advantage of her. She was invited to interview for a position in California. "The job is yours," they told her on the phone, "just come out for an interview as a formality—when we give you the job we'll give the airfare." Four weeks later when she flew out there it cost her several hundred dollars and Bobo had to drive her to the airport at the crack of dawn (I may have forgotten to mention I don't know how to drive—a traumatic accident shortly after I received my license, when I backed into a tree, put the fear of driving into me for life) and she had to wait for four hours in Chicago. And when she arrived in some obscure town in California, a town she had to ride in a six-seater airplane to get to, was anyone there to meet her? No. "I should have gotten on the next plane and come home," my mother wept to me. But no, she waited and waited, and called the college until finally a pimpled silent student was sent to meet her. They drove for two hours, my mother chattering, struggling frantically to keep the student amused. There was no reply. The luncheon where she was to read her poems was served on the floor of a sagging house where she was offered a plate of zucchini. The interview lasted several hours; she was asked such questions as "Why do you want to teach poetry?" "Why do you want to live here in California?" (the college was in the middle of a little desert) and "Tell us a story," ("There was a lady poet who flew West looking for a job. . ." my mother began). Finally, at the end of the day, she was told she did not have the job and was sent home. The job went to a man who had driven out from the East, all his possessions tied to the roof of his car. He had sold his house. Although he had published only a few poems, was not as well known as my mother nor had as much teaching experience, and had long, lank, greasy hair and a mountainous belly, it was

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only fair that the job be awarded to him. Fair? It was only typical, a long string of events in my mother's life all following the same pattern. My mother, crushed, came home, where she lay in bed weeping. The fare for the airplane trip was never sent to her.

Only the week before she had left for the interview for the promised job in California, my mother and I loaded all of our books in preparation for her departure in order to facilitate renting out the house. Though we had no furniture, we did have books. My mother had made an art out of finding cheap books. We had shelf after shelf (built by my father on a long ago Sunday when it had seemed likely that my parents would be rejoined or at least that my father would continue to receive the sexual favors of my mother) filled with 15¢ specials—remaindered paperback books purchased in drugstores and Woolworth's with the covers ripped off and on special sale—books about girls murdered in Chicago, in Michigan; a series of disease books; young boys who were autistic, aggressive or retarded; priests who were eaten alive by their congregations in Papua; mothers of five with brain tumors, who had to have part of their skulls removed and a metal plate inserted that continued to bulge as the tumor grew; all true, all real stories. Also there was the psychic phenomena section of the shelves—hundreds of *Fate* magazines to which my mother subscribed, the *Life of Edgar Cayce*, strange and incomprehensible phenomena that had transpired on the face of the earth that no one could explain—frogs dropping from the air, an inexplicable rain of slices of meat and blood, a hole in the Russian tundra that appeared mysteriously and was believed to have been an atomic explosion from a UFO. All these my mother studied avidly, a pastime my father in his heyday had nothing but contempt for. Once when I asked him how he thought acupuncture worked, he said that the Chinese peasants had very primitive minds and it worked on them as a mild sort of hypnosis. "But what about the Americans it works on? And the Europeans?" As a neo-Freudian my father believed the primitive mind was widespread. Why, he was only one genera-

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tion removed from the Ukrainian peasant himself. "There is no alternate reality," he told me on one of my visits to his house which by now by mutual consent had been reduced to once or twice a year, "and I'm tired of all this nonsense of people trying to prove that there is."

My father did not believe in ESP, only coincidence. My mother, though she did not go in for fads or fashions, did. All the ESP books had to be packed in boxes and stored in the attic along with the rest of our belongings. What books did we have worth saving? Box after box of books—three boxes of the Harvard Classics, rotting and mildewed, that had belonged to my mother's father, an *Encyclopaedia Brittanica* from 1899 that my mother bought somewhere for five dollars, a high school-type encyclopaedia from 1973 that my mother bought for Bobo several years earlier so he could study. Then there were the "antique" books my mother had found in old shops for a quarter apiece, mouse eaten, nibbled pages, stinking of age—mostly seventy-five or a hundred years old, or older, but none in good condition—old editions of Hardy, books on social etiquette from 1853, *Godey's Lady's Book*s, books that contained nothing but bizarre quotes and books that purported to be scientific but in reality were about made-up wonders of the world—strange animals with the head of a bird and the body of a dog, men who ate earth, the wondrous continent of Australia—facts stranger than the strangest *Ripley's Believe It or Not*. And then there were the books of poetry, used paper volumes my mother bought at the student bookstores in Cambridge, and the hundreds of copies of magazines my mother had published in or had subscribed to and now could not bear to part with. Box after box of used books, all sealed and taped and marked "Psychic Phenomena," "Disease," etc., book after book, none worth a thing, each one covered with food stains (both my mother and I ate while we read and covered pages with ketchup, blotched them with grease stains the size of fingerprints). It was possible to see on what page one had been at breakfast, where the tuna fish for lunch came in at page one hundred and fifty-nine, and then by

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dinner, a faint reek of onions or perhaps some ice cream, chocolate blobs and dots. My mother and I did more than just read books, we devoured them, absorbed them. Most of the boxes were too heavy for me to lift and so I had to leave them in the hall next to the linen closet until Bobo came home to help.

To get to the attic involved opening the linen closet, removing the shelves and taking down a small door held up by hooks. Bobo or myself could then scramble up to the storage space above. Up in the attic, covered with dust, on my hands and knees (the attic was not much of an attic, the ceiling too low to stand up fully, the floorboards scattered feet apart so that one had to balance on them precariously to avoid the weaker spots in between) I arranged the cartons, stacking them one on top of the next, unable to breathe from the dust, my hands numb from the cold. It was important to try to fit the boxes of books one on top of the next, saving space as economically as possible, because there were many more boxes of books to come—there was additional stuff now waiting in the basement.

After most of the boxes were in the attic a slight crack developed along the kitchen ceiling. Sometimes my mother and I while eating would look up and see that the spidery scrawl of cracks, like some antique lettering above our heads, was spreading. One day Bobo came home from school and with my help we moved the rest of the boxes up there. (My help! My weak and spindly arms struggled to lift even the lightest of the boxes!) "I think it's okay," he said, "but I wouldn't put any more stuff up there." He looked at my mother and me ominously, an angry contemptuous grimace on his face. "What do you want to keep all that stuff for? Why don't you just throw it out? It's just a lot of junk. You can get books from the library if you want to read." Bobo was not a reader but had turned into a television watcher, though he did go in for science fiction books, also books that were adapted from science fiction television series, *Popular Mechanics* magazine, *Popular Science* and *Scientific American*, and in addition *Consumer Reports*, which he pored over for hours. With further contempt he rearranged all my stacking and packing up there in the attic,

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telling me I knew nothing about structure, that I had no sense and did not know even how to get the maximum out of a space, which was true, and something I could have told myself if he had come home earlier before it was necessary for me to devote myself to such back-breaking activity. Bobo was also good at packing the trunks of cars for long journeys, and like my father he snarled a great deal with anger while doing so, as if that was part of the game, irritated beyond belief that he was the only one with any common sense or intelligence.

At this time jobs for writers were difficult to find. In particular, jobs for poets, jobs for women poets, jobs for older women poets who were geniuses, who had not started writing until quite late in life, who were prone to stare into space for long periods of time, who were not good at sucking up to lousy crummy heads of departments, not good at playing the games of those who imagined themselves to be poets but were in reality poem-pushers, jobs for people with the aforementioned qualities were not easy to find.

"All I needed was this one thing to push me over the edge," my mother said when she learned she had not gotten the job. "Being over the edge probably wouldn't be any different than being here though. Maybe we're already over the edge, who knows?" We decided to invest in a major load of groceries so that neither of us ever had to leave the house again. My mother and I went to the store where we stocked up on various kinds of food.

Christ! the desires that accompany poverty! (Maybe they accompany being rich, too; I don't know.) The desire for products, clear, packaged, sealed-in-plastic products, untouched by anybody else before; unopened, unleafed-through magazines, every one on the stand dying to be bought! Boxes of cookies, hair care products, things in little boxes, unwrapped, uncontaminated! To be able to use something once and then throw it away! Yes, that's right, to leaf through a magazine (being the first to do so, not some magazine found in a rubbish bin or given by some neighbor, but a magazine that no one else has ever touched, no one has ever cracked open before) and

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then to be able to just throw it away, just dump it into the garbage and not have it sitting around for months in a heap with other old magazines collecting dust and all worn out; to be able to buy hard cover books, crack the spines open and leave them sitting around *unread*. New bottles of everything! New fresh unrolled unbent tubes of toothpaste, cigarettes (not that I smoke), laundry detergent, underarm deodorant, Saran Wrap, Baggies! New, new, new! And all of it never before contaminated by human hands!

Since it was my mother's and my intention never to leave the house again, it was necessary to purchase quantities of food. Together we waltzed down the aisle placing in the basket packages of pork chops, gallons of chocolate chip ice cream, containers of cole slaw, onion rolls, pickles in jars, salamis. There were perhaps thirty or forty cans of tuna fish in the cabinets at home, but my mother found room in the shopping baskets for more because they were on sale. My mother's hair, black and wild, cascaded down her shoulders. She wore a venomous black rain hat; we wore venomous expressions of rage and boredom on our faces, the inexpressive anger of iguanas. I wielded the shopping cart like a dangerous sports car. "This and this and this," as we picked up chocolate chips for cookies, black cocoa cookies, Triscuits, Wheat Thins, heads of cheese, bottles and bottles of diet ginger soda—the childhood fantasy of snatching down everything from the shelves come true. The cha-cha muzak of the supermarket loud in my ears, the inner-city shoppers around us looking even stranger than my mother and myself, in their shabby beaver coats, in their ancient voluminous hats and scarves draped around their necks, all ancient themselves, white and black trembling old people. My mother and I blended right in. My mother's glasses were dark to hide her weepy eyes, I had on a pair of mirrored sunglasses and wore a pair of green hospital surgeon's pants I had picked up somewhere along the line, I think from a friend at Columbia. Actually, this was the first time either of us had been out of the house in several weeks, since the terrible announcement that my mother had not received the job. Over

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and over the supermarket played the best-loved tunes from *My Fair Lady* or some such musical. My mother grabbed my arm and together we danced past the shopping basket, around the ancient ladies fumbling their cans of sardines, before stopping to snatch more food to bring home. We were stocking up, we were laying in for a long winter.

As we carried the bags of groceries in from the car the phone rang, my father called, telling me he was coming to Boston for a psychiatric convention. I picked up the phone and swung the receiver, with its extra long cord, over my shoulder, so that I could unload groceries while I talked. "Yes? Yes?" I said, "Saturday? Okay, sure. So how long is the psychiatric convention?"

"Just the weekend. It's on treating mental illness with drugs."

"Well, that sounds interesting," I said. Actually, I didn't see how it could be interesting for my father—he didn't even believe in mental illness, let alone that it might be chemically based.

I was right, because he said, "No, it's not interesting, but it's something I have to keep up with, even though it's all a lot of crap." Bobo at that moment came into the kitchen. He had gotten a ride home from school to do his laundry.

"Ma, why do you sit there clutching your head that way? You look deranged," he said.

Most hair stylists take a piece of hair and cut it firmly—now, Bobo asked her to trim his hair. Before her marriage my mother had had training as a hairdresser. She took up each few strands of hair timidly and then snipped them uneasily, letting them lie on the floor in a black and brown irregular, random pattern, as if she were destroying something delicate. I said when she was done I would let her trim my hair too. "What ever possessed me to marry your father?" she said. "Why did I ever marry that maniac?"

"Well, it's too late now."

"Oh, I don't know."

While my mother snipped I leafed through the Sunday

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paper, the "News of the World". A boy had been given shock treatment as he persisted in exposing himself every time he saw a woman while jogging. He jogged ten miles a day. A girl with polio in a wheelchair had been kicked out of a bar because, "The wheelchair damaged the rug and made dents in the door." The life of an English leper was described in detail—persecuted by a sadistic Anglo-Indian nurse as a child in India, abandoned by his parents in New York City, he returned to India to work for a time as a used car salesman and photojournalist. Then he caught leprosy. How this happened was not described. He was smuggled back into England. For eight days on the ship he could never change his clothes or bandages; then he was found in some hidden recess of the boat. "Dad says he's coming into Boston for the weekend to go to a psychiatric convention and he's going to stop by to talk to me," I said.

"He can't do that!" my mother said. "This means I'll have to clean up the house!" Although my mother had many friends, we had few visitors because we lived in a bad area of the city and her friends seemed to find it difficult to reach us. Hundreds of poems with typing errors lay on all the floors. We had no furniture, either: for one thing, we were too poor; for another, the neighborhood was so dangerous that any sign of opulence would have guaranteed a robbery. As it was, we had nothing to lose but a small black and white television set that got only poor reception and two chairs we had bought when we purchased the house—rattan with soiled leopard print cushions. The rug my mother's parents had given my mother and father when they were still married had been put into storage when my mother was told she had a job in California. We did not bother to get it out of storage. "There's no sense in that," my mother said. "If we got it out I would get a job instantly and then we'd have to take it back."

My mother and I dined separately, each in bed in our respective rooms, with bowls of chocolate chip ice cream doused with walnuts and syrup for dinner. Neither of us wanted to wash dishes, so everything was paper. The cups, the coffee cups and

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the bowls and plates, all were of wonderful and new paper products we had discovered on the market. Only the silverware was the same, one of the few things my mother had taken with us after the divorce, that stainless ware of curved, baby, primary shapes. But it was now diminished in number. Pieces of the service had been lost along the way, or badly battered and ground in the disposal which had a penchant for bending spoons though it could remarkably leave banana peels untouched. "Do you have the taco sauce?" I called from my room to hers. "No, did you take the Triscuits?" My mother dipped Triscuits into a small can with an Italian label that contained eggplant, tomato bits and olives, an old favorite. I, on the other hand, dipped taco chips into a hot taco sauce. My mother, propped in her bed, surrounded by books, magazines and papers, her notebook at her side, would be absently plunging her hand in a jar of peanut butter while she called from her room to mine about what she was reading, complaining about all the poets who were getting published because of politics while she industriously and integrally plugged along. She had just received in the mail an influential magazine for writers that this month had an article advocating that writers be forced to pay to appear in magazines. "Do you believe it?" she said.

"I believe it," I said. "I don't believe how naïve you can still be for not expecting something like this to happen in the first place. Who told you to write poetry in the first place? Writing poems is a rich person's hobby, not a starving poet's."

In my room, the television, tuned to a privately owned religious station I was fond of, instructed us: "It's wonderful to know the scripture. It's true and if we all stick to it we will have the same thing we had in the forties and fifties—God don't change, friend, God don't change I can tell you that. When you stand before him on the day of judgement he is going to be the same as on the day he made Adam. I'm glad of that, because man changes so much you never know what kind of rut he's going to be in. If you're one of those people who change, well you better change your ways, because God don't change, friend, God don't change. Let me quote you from Apostle

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Paul: 'The time will come when they will not be upholding sound doctrines.' I wish I had more of an education than I had, friend, but I tell you I've been to church after church and I've seen some of the professors and doctors who came out of college who could no more preach than a chicken could—''

''The days are over, Ma, when they pay you for your poems,'' I called to the other room. ''I hate to tell you. I don't mean to be unkind, but why should an editor, why should a magazine pay you for one of your poems when there's a lot of people out there dying to be poets, who would give their poems away for free or would even pay? It's time you took a look at the world around you.''

My mother, when not writing poems or recording her dreams in large black notebooks, was occupied with contacting the spirits in the other world or speaking to her collection of friends on the phone, all of whom turned to her as their guru, seeing her for the saint and great poet she was. I was not alone in my opinion of my mother as prophet, isolate in her world of doom to come. She had one friend who was very rich, and who had been seeing a psychiatrist for twenty-five years, since the age of eighteen. After her friend had been going to this psychiatrist daily for ten years she looked up to find him asleep in his chair, snoring gently. ''Wake up,'' she said to him. Finally he was roused, some ten minutes later, at a cost of some ten or fifteen dollars. He told her he had not gotten much sleep the night before. Another friend of my mother's was recently divorced when after forty-five years of marriage she realized she was a lesbian. One friend was an epileptic. Another friend had two wives. The epileptic had a red face and a tremendous nose like a tusk; the friend with two wives raised exotic species of fish and had long flowing red locks of hair. All of her friends wrote poetry and they called my mother at least once a day—my mother could not call them of course, because we could not even afford to use the phone at the present cost of message units—and they spoke to her for great lengths of time, asking my mother to critique their poems and their lives. I suggested to her she charge for her time. After two hours on the phone she

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would emerge from her room white-faced and exhausted. Most of the women friends had high voices and when I picked up the phone after it rang they would say in high whispery voices, "Mavis? Is that you Mavis?" The lesbian friend was very easily pushed around and had once had to pay for somebody's cat to ride in a taxi. She had been asked to take care of the cat while some friends went on vacation and they had sent the cat to her with a nine dollar fare on the taxi to pay. The cat arrived sitting regally on the back seat of the cab and when brought into the house urinated copiously. The lesbian since her divorce had unfortunately had to live alone in an expensive suburb of Boston, unable to find anyone she was attracted to. She too did not like to go outside. All of us were too timid or angry to leave the house for more than brief periods of time.

Our only guest was Bobo, who could not officially be considered a guest. He had to return from school often to change fuses (I was afraid of being electrocuted) or fix the heating or the wiring. Mr. O'Keefe, the former owner, had accidentally wired the house so that it acted as a giant receiver; when the telephone was picked up, the ear piece blasted rock and roll music from an AM station. My mother's room, hardly larger than her double bed, had three different patterns of wall paper on the walls. Most of the rooms had four: Bobo's room had one wall covered with wall paper with a design of brown palm trees, one wall of pink cherry blossoms, another of a speckled, spattered brown pattern, and the last with a design of interwoven reptiles. The hallway was patterned with dancing ladies at Versailles and chipmunks in the woods eating acorns. I was lucky enough to only have to live in my room with a pattern of puce plaid, roses on lattice work, bamboo shoots with tigers peering from behind and finally a wall of green narrow stripes.

Along with books in bags my mother had gotten out many records from the library in preparation for a poetry reading in a Cambridge coffee shop. She had been invited to read by one of her friends who ran a poetry-reading series. Since my mother had not received the job she had plenty of time to prepare for the reading. My mother invariably read her poems to music, or

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played excerpts from songs before and after each poem. The music she chose was always bizarre, songs that managed to be both awkward and embarrassing to me at the same time—"Zip-A-Dee-Do-Dah," from Walt Disney's *Song of The South*; a boys' choir singing in Japanese; obscure lieders by Schubert; or a crooning tune by Frank Sinatra or Jerry Vale.

At the reading my mother was pale and ethereal in a white faille dress donated to her by a rich friend who handed clothes to my mother like money to Mozart. My mother insisted I come. She stood before an audience of perhaps some fifteen people in a dimly lit, hot room. Coffee cups clinked. A radiator plunked. No one had bothered to advertise that my mother was going to be reading; there had been no publicity. My mother placed her sheaf of poems on the podium before her. She cleared her throat, then took a sip of the wine that filled a large plastic wine glass on the shelf beneath the top of the podium. She put on a pair of half-glasses, tortoiseshell ones that pointed madly upward at the corners. Then she turned on the small cassette tape recorder on the shelf of the podium next to the glass of wine. From it emerged a thin, quavering child's voice which sung slowly in German, *Muss I'den, muss I'den, muss I'den, muss I'den.* Another of her finds from the record collection at the library. Then a click as my mother switched off the machine and began to read. "When he saw me coming he arranged himself in a line," she said. This current reading she was giving was entitled "Modern Americans." All the poems she read in the next hour were about Americans in the 1970's—strange, queer, characters my mother imagined the United States was peopled with. There were men who fed flies to Venus Fly Traps, mailmen in the shape of fish who nibbled on letters they would not let her see, would not deliver. Fat men, tumescent cake-eaters, babies with dandruff. All these and other poems she read to her distraught audience, who sat stiffly, painfully in shock beside me. It was almost more than I could bear; my mother's long black hair cascading over her shoulders, her hand trembling as she raised the glass of wine to her lips. You have no idea how painful it was for me to hear

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these lunatic genius poems. It was as if *I* were up there reading, the hostile queer crowd spread before me. The fragments of music reached my ears, played on the tinny cassette player, quivering speeded-up songs, the music choices of a madman. Though I had read each of my mother's poems many times ("You are my best critic," she was always telling me) now, in hearing them read aloud I suddenly heard things I didn't remember from before. There was something she was saying about "The average American spends four years of his life in moving." That couldn't be right! I wanted to jump up in front of the audience and make an announcement. "Pay my mother no mind, ladies and gentlemen," I wanted to say. The faces around me were white and shocked, peakedly still. Sometimes a reedy laugh broke from one of them, the nervous chirp of a sparrow. My mother read each poem in a sullen voice that cracked through the room like shavings of glass. No one, I sensed, knew quite what to make of her, knew quite what to do. When my mother was finished there was a great pause and then the applause like a great uneasy beast grew louder and louder. No one wanted to have anything to do with something great. But at least, I thought, watching the upset audience leaving the room like frightened bunnies, at least they knew the truth. The upright lamps on the floor swayed, the shadows rocked back and forth.

"Was I all right?" my mother said, clutching my arm weakly. "Was I any good?"

"Yeah, yeah, you were fine," I said. Still, it was not easy being related to a genius. For one thing my mother, her fragile dinosaur face, was unbearably strange even to me. I did not like to see her up there at the podium before anyone other than myself, splayed like an Aztec sacrifice before the unbending crowd.

A short time after my mother learned she was not to get the job in California, we were sitting at the dinner table, the two of us both in a slough of despair for our various reasons, eating, and reading some new books purchased from a used paperback bookstore that had just opened up nearby ("return two and get

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one free''). ''Okay,'' my mother said looking up from her book as she nibbled on M&Ms that she ate while chewing her Finnish gum, ''okay, so you want to be famous. But who doesn't want to be famous today? Everyone wants to be a star. But I'm telling you, you can be famous. But I can assure you that once you are famous you will only be hated more. Most of the time with my poems nobody bothers to tell me they've seen them or read them. But if they do say, 'Oh by the way I saw your poem in the *Atlantic*,' then that's all they say. They don't say they liked it, or anything. Well, let me tell you something: next time somebody says that to me, 'I saw your poem,' I'm going to say to them, 'Oh, I'm glad you liked it.' I'm sick of this! Just sick of it! What good does it do me? I won a contest judged by a poet considered the best in America and I can't even get a job because of it. I don't even get any publicity! I sent out a manuscript of poems, three-quarters of them had been published in important magazines. I had worked for years and years on those poems, fixing commas, changing a word here and there. I had to pay a reader's fee of two dollars, four dollars, I don't know how much. They kept the manuscript for four months and then sent it back with a mimeographed slip. Not even a personal note. I might as well have been somebody who dashed the poems off the night before as a published poet. Couldn't they have had even the decency to include a little note? This is what will happen to you when you are famous.''

''Oh.''

''Or keeping my manuscript for a year and when I ask for it back I am informed it is lost. The postage I spend in a year, the xeroxing—I think I once calculated it costs me twenty dollars to write a poem. Why do I bother? It's only editors and their friends who are publishing themselves and hiring each other for all the jobs. Any magazine I pick up today I can't read the poems in it; I can't read more than the first three lines of it, the stuff is so bad. How would you like to get little rejections in the mail from crummy magazines no one has ever heard of that say your poem is not *quite* good enough? Or a nicely typed poem comes back all scribbled on and coffee stained. I can tell you

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that you don't *want* to be famous. Why, I'm hated so much already I would hate to see what it would be like if I was *really* famous. Today in the mail I got a letter from Louise Brownthal that asked me why I was contributing to her niggerization. What did I do to her? I met the woman for lunch last week in Harvard Square—she was the one who asked me, I had no desire to meet her but did so out of the goodness of my heart. Why, it was all I could do to get myself out of the house. I had to get up at six in the morning to get dressed to meet her at twelve o'clock. You know that's how long it takes me to get ready to go someplace. And then a week later to receive a note from her telling me I was contributing to her niggerization."

"Maybe that's the name of her magazine."

"I think she wanted me to recommend her for a job at B.U. But I don't have a job myself! And there are no jobs at B.U. She seemed to think there was one and that I would be willing to recommend her. But she has no training. She told me she spoke to the head of the department and told him she was re-typing her resume to send him because it was not well typed. I wouldn't brag about something not being well typed, but she seemed to think she had been very clever in telling him she was re-typing it. Then I had to read her poems. What could I say? I'm very tactful. But apparently I wasn't supposed to criticize them at all. What did she show them to me for then? She was very interested in meeting you when I told her about you, how you wanted to be famous. She's twenty-nine years old, she's on welfare, she has a child—"

"Isn't this the one with a red face whose ears stick out?"

"Yes. I told her you weren't interested in women right now, which made it sound like you were a homosexual—"

Above the table where my mother and I now sat reading, there was a horrific, vomitous groan from the ceiling and a sharp crack. Only a few feet to the left of where we were sitting, the ceiling began to buckle and sag alarmingly. "An earthquake," I said. The two of us jumped up, books still in hand (I was reading *Eileen*, the story of a seventeen-year-old who died of leukemia, my mother was engrossed in a volume called

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Freaks) and then with a great cloud of dust and a clatter, the ceiling caved in all the way, while box after box of the books that we had put in the attic came pouring down, splitting open and scattering across the entire floor, along with fiberglass stuffing of pink and white that was supposed to be insulating the attic; dirt, plaster, floorboards—several books narrowly missed my mother's head who was closer to the accident than me. Only two feet to the right and we both would have been killed or seriously injured by the *Encyclopaedia* of 1899. The roar of books grew in intensity, then stopped and the cloud of dust began to settle. A gaping hole was left in the kitchen ceiling, and when, after a pause while my mother and I gazed at the ruins around us, I stepped beneath the hole and looked up, I saw above me what seemed to be several more boxes ready to tip. "Yaaaaa!" I screamed and flung myself out of the way. An additional couple of boxes plunged to where I had been standing only seconds before. "Poltergeist," my mother said, and with a sigh got out the dustpan and broom and began to sweep around her.

My mother stayed inside in bed, a shy elongated lizard. I took walks only to go to the store to get milk. I saw only the brutal pigeons in the Boston street—a drop of blood a speck in the corner of the eye of a local frail brown one, a bird plucked nearly clean, devoid of feathers. Sometimes I stayed inside all day and emerged at one or two in the morning on my trek to the grocery store, choosing that time as most likely to avoid others of my species. In the dark a truck was parked like some prehistoric reptile at the fruit market. Two men sat in a car looking out the window, one silently smoking. Near us was a bar that sometimes opened to reveal women like tropical birds inside, French *perroquets* of South Boston, in their red and green silk dresses that were probably not silk but merely silky-looking in the dim light and in reality were synthetic Qiana.

There was nothing like the fizzy white fluorescent glare of the all-night grocery store after the dark streets, the hum of the refrigeration and the freezers, the smell of insecticide and a slight smell of mildew behind the boxes of stale crackers. I saw

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roaches scurry in between cans. Behind the checkout counter a man stood vaguely toying with something on the counter beneath him, his radio tuned to a Top 40 station. A man holding a quart of milk tipped over a box of hundreds of miniature footballs on the low shelf next to the check-out counter that held the penny candy and candy bars. He stooped on the ground to pick them up as they rolled. The man behind the register left it to try and help. Above their heads I examined the stacked rows of Babe Ruth, Oh Henry bars, Hundred Thousand Dollar bars—and the new products, stuff that had come along since I was a kid, things I was always anxious to try: a bag of colored pellets called "Volcano Rocks," something described as a flavored powder delicious beyond belief, packets that advertised their ability to burn, crackle and explode in the mouth. Instead I settled for the purchase of a pair of red wax paraffin lips, the chewable kind that children wear at Halloween as a disguise, and I stooped to pick up some of the gilt wrapped chocolate footballs that had scattered across the room. I took a warm, yellowish orange with a stamped message "Color Added" from a pile of stacked fruit on the counter and looked through a glassed-in refrigerator at some various pale hunks of meat marked "Bologna," "Roast Beef," "Salami," all basically the same huge lardlike chunks that may have been permanent fixtures of the store, for all I know, propped up like giant larvae or ballast beneath the flickering light.

It was full fall by now, few trees in the city, but still the leaves crunching like Chinese chow mein noodles underfoot; even in the city the maple and the dandelion scattered their seed to the cement turf. If I was looking for randomness it was to be found only in the pattern of the oak leaves on the sidewalk. What kind of a city would hire maintenance men to cut down highway grass on the meridian with tiny sickles? Only Boston. Oh Boston, home of the second rate, the minor stink! Was there to be any escape for me at all? The air made my skin turn inwards with the cold, a wet smack in the face. The honk of the city, the beep of the alcoholic streets, the smell of new laundry and the fish bay was a dull wet boredom. Some men in a car, spotting

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me on the empty street, said "Cool it," to one another loud enough for me to hear through the sealed windows of their black Cadillac, and they shut off the lights of the car. Stolen, I thought, and then for some reason I was sure that the men in the car were detectives hired by my father to follow me home to my mother. I put on the pair of red wax lips I had bought in the grocery store and ducked my head, slipping from telephone pole to pole on my paranoid route.

Oh pigeon-toed Boston, I did not want you and you did not want me. To myself I echoed my brother's words from years past, "Why does no one want me?" and then, my own addition, "Why am I not yet famous?" I longed for fame. I longed for the Johnny Carson Show. I longed for even the Today Show (though appearing on the Today Show did not interest me as much as the Johnny Carson Show, for appearing on it would mean getting up at the crack of dawn to get to the studio on time—still, I thought, they set you up in a hotel; a limo arrives at six or five in the morning to pick you up; perhaps it wouldn't be too bad). The Today Show was better than nothing indeed, for one appearance on it would mean that how many people? Millions? Billions? Would mean that billions of people would know that I was alive. I dreamt of whips and steel chains, anything to give me power, call attention to myself. I had desire without the ambition. Without the ambition, without the ability, I said to myself as I carried the milk for breakfast home down the street. I tasted old salad on my breath regurgitated from dinner, the taste of lettuce rancid as any guinea pig in a cage. A car could run me down at any minute on the street and all desire for fame would be gone, unrealized in a flash, but since it did not I had to live with it. I ate a pre-packaged ice cream cone I had bought in the store, blubbery as rubber. Nothing had a taste to it anymore. I should have studied to be a clothing designer. I should have studied to design automobiles. Anything practical would be better than this vacuum I had created for myself. Lately I had been having fantasies about designing women's hats—I imagined creating hats like those from Medieval days, or from the Renaissance: two towering

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peaks, wimpled and veiled, or one long cone like an enormous phallus from a woman's head, a Comedia Dell' Arte hat in puce green or zippered silver nylon. A whole season of women decked in my image. Still it was no use. I would not have been profitable or self-sufficient even in the women's fashion industry. I would have had to learn to stitch expertly, or sleep with men, or sell my creations to the right people. I would have had to learn to be pleasant to people I felt undeserving of pleasantness. I was too much of a large trembling bunny, a tremulous Woody Allen. Many things seemed to fall off shelves when I walked into rooms, though this my mother blamed on spirits working through the adolescent body. A small round animal nearsightedly crossed the road farther in front of me on a dimly lit strip of road. I could not tell what it was—a rat? Hardly, the rats here were quick and hurried about their business with ease. A cat? Still, I did not think a cat, unless a mutant, would have such short legs. Possibly it was some animal from the country, a raccoon or an opossum who had absent-mindedly stumbled into the wrong terrain, far from its native corn fields. I did not see where it went.

On Sunday, my father, now driving a new Spitfire convertible (white), pulled up to a screeching stop in front of our house with its pinhead-sized city lawn. "You are not to let him in the house," my mother whispered frantically as she rushed to lock herself in the bedroom. "Tell him to take you out somewhere for coffee." From the window I saw my father getting out of his youthful car that was obviously too small for him. I rushed down to the front door, grabbing my coat on the way and opened it before he could ring the bell. "Dad, let's go out to the coffee shop down the street, what say, hey? We don't seem to have any—"

"I want to speak to your mother." My father pushed past me before I could get out and shut the door behind me. Then he was in the house, my mother's private and only property. How could I explain this to my mother? The endless recriminations I would have to go through for not being able to keep my own father out of my own house! My father did not look around

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him, though my mother, in fearful anticipation that someday something like this would occur (that my father might someday actually make it through the door, a door that of one kind or another he had been trying to break down for more than ten years) had specially straightened up the living room and brushed the dirt out from the leopard print chairs, though the rest of the house remained as before—the hole in the kitchen ceiling gaped untouched. "Mavis!" My father stood at the bottom of the stairs calling, "I want to speak to you!"

It was apparent my father had lost his mind. My father was irate; he was having the temper tantrum I had feared since early childhood. All those signs he had posted around the edge of the property: NO TRESPASSING! NO HUNTING! And here he was himself now, trespassing away. He stormed up the stairs. He bashed on my mother's door. His knock was the same knock he had used on Bobo's or my door when as children we would fight with him and lock ourselves in our rooms. It was a knock that could not be ignored. "Mavis, I want to speak with you! Let me in! I know you're in there!"

"She's not home, Dad."

Why did he hate her so? He hated his mother, he hated me—but why? From my mother's room no sound emerged. "I want to know why you have not answered my letter. I don't want an answer from a lawyer! I want an answer from *you*. I wrote to you several months ago and I asked you for an immediate response so I could make preparations to give you your final payments. During that time I continued to pay you alimony. Well, I waited to hear from you—I am not an unfair man—but I am not going to pay you any more, do you hear me! Do you hear me!" He began to pound on the door. My father reeked of marijuana, he reeked of booze. Had he had a fight with Rexy, his girlfriend? I wondered. Usually his hysteria was controlled, the anguish of a man who knew he was the only sane man on a planet of lunatics. But now he seemed to have gone over the deep end. From my mother's room there was no answer except the typewriter being wheeled across the room to help barricade herself in. Uh-oh, I thought. And I was right, that did it to my

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father. With a brute kick of his army boots (still the same black boots that laced up the calf like the appendages of a club foot he had worn for fifteen or more years now) he pushed open the door to my mother's room—it was not much of a door, only a thin double sheet of plywood and the lock on it, I noted later, was one of Mr. O'Keefe's feeble inventions that could not hold back a damaged insect—and knocking over my mother's IBM Executive typewriter on its wooden stand,he stepped inside.

The shelves in my mother's bedroom were covered with objects—boxes of chewing gum she ordered from a health food store that came in packages of a hundred, wrapped in a blue and white metallic plastic with something strange printed on it in Finnish—a chewing gum that was supposed to be sugarless with an added ingredient that promoted health and white teeth. There were books of poetry on the shelves along with a litter of loose poems, notebooks, library books, an egg beater, bottles of Indian nuts, packets of old letters and M&Ms, boxes of IBM typewriter ribbons, and at one end of the middle shelf a tremendous old cast-iron postage meter of an army metal green color my mother used to weigh her doughty manuscripts when she sent them out for publication. It was this last that my father, flinging his arms about the room in a rage, perhaps only hoping to frighten her a bit, knocked into. This sudden jarring of a great weight tipped the shelf free from its metal brackets, and the whole thing collapsed, clobbering my mother who stood holding her ground only a few feet from my father. The shelf, the books and the postage meter hit her squarely on the side of her head.

At least this is what my father told me had happened while we waited for the ambulance to arrive, and this is what he told the police when they arrived, as they sniffed suspiciously at his alcohol reek. But in court, after I explained how my father had come to tell my mother he was no longer going to pay her alimony despite the letter to him from her lawyer; how my father himself had built the shelves proclaiming at the time that they were unshakeable, would hold anything, "solid craftsmanship" that would take "a lot" to tip—after I mentioned these

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things, though my father was a shrink and a figure of respectable justice and authority (though this may in actuality have been what tipped the scales against him, so to speak) he was given 10–15 for involuntary manslaughter. At the time the shelf fell I was standing in my brother's room, head pressed timidly and cowardly against the window as I looked out at the street, wondering why ten years or more after the divorce I was still being made to suffer for it. Through the closed door I could hear the raised voices of my parents, sounding much the same as they had when I was a child. When I heard the crash I went out into the hall and into my mother's room (I was not at all alarmed, since the shelves did in reality tip over quite easily, often waking us up unexpectedly in the middle of the night due to an inbalance of weight) and found my mother lying beneath the rubble of her poems, black print on the white pages, and her poetry books scattered and opened before her. I picked the things off her and saw a triangular shaped cornermark at the side of her head and a seam of blood trickling and blending with her black, shiny hair. My father did not say a thing nor did he help me remove the pine board shelf, but instead he paced back and forth in the narrow space between my mother's double bed and the wall with its dappled pattern of bluebirds on a summer field, and nervously picked at some of the hairs on the lowest part of his beard.

While we waited for the ambulance, I gathered the poems up from where they had blown across my mother's bedroom floor. For some reason I felt I should be doing this with tweezers, as if I was afraid to touch the poems with my hands, and then this reminded me of the way a dentist uses tweezers to pick wet pieces of cotton out of a patient's mouth after an X-ray. I could almost hear the soft plunk of the wet pieces of cotton hitting the garbage pail bottom. Once before my father had struck my mother on her face (I later told the court) at the beginning of her writing career. This was a year or so before the divorce, and my mother had just begun to write poems. The first poem she wrote was accepted by the *New Yorker*. As a child she had written poems and her relatives had called her

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Mavis-the-Poet, a name she hated. As a child she had been embarrassed by being called a poet, because to her it meant there was nothing else she was good for. But then before the divorce, looking around for something to do to take her mind off my father, she took a poetry writing course, and the first poem she wrote was the one accepted by the *New Yorker*. She felt her fate was decided. She had been avoiding what was probably her true vocation for many years. "Still," as she told me, "I don't look forward to being a poet, the poet's life and all. I'd pay somebody else to lead it for me if I could."

One evening before her class she could not find a poem she had written. My father, while accusing her of sleeping with the professor, had hauled off and belted her in the face. I stood in the room, helplessly trying to find my mother's poem so she would not cry.

And yet, curiously enough, a short time after the "accident" with the postage meter and my mother, I took a close look at myself in the mirror and who was it that I saw? My father. Yes, there were those same piggy eyes, deep set, lizard lidded, the too-sensuous mouth, a mermaid curve and a ripple, a flourish of a nose. I sold the house and put half the money in the bank for Bobo. With the rest, my father now in jail, I took off for London.

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Charles Wright

The Southern Cross

Things that divine us we never touch:

The black sounds of the night music,
The Southern Cross, like a kite at the end of its string,

And now this sunrise, and empty sleeve of a day,
The rain just starting to fall, and then not fall,

No trace of a story line.

All day I've remembered a lake and a sudsy shoreline,
Gauze curtains blowing in and out of open windows all over
the South.

It's 1936, in Tennessee. I'm one
And spraying the dead grass with a hose.
The curtains blow in and out.

And then it's not. And I'm not and they're not.

Or it's 1941 in a brown suit, or '53 in its white shoes,
Overlay after overlay tumbled and brought back,
As meaningless as the sea would be
if the sea could remember its waves. . .

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Nothing had told me my days were marked for a doom
under the cold stars of the Virgin.
Nothing had told me that woe would buzz at my side like a fly.

The morning is dark with spring.
The early blooms on the honeysuckle shine like maggots after the rain.
The purple mouths of the passion blossoms
open their white gums to the wind.

How sweet the past is, no matter how wrong, or how sad.
How sweet is yesterday's noise.

All day the ocean was like regret,
clearing its throat, brooding and self-absorbed.

Now the wisteria tendrils extend themselves like swan's necks under Orion.

Now the small stars in the orange trees.

At Garda, on Punto San Vigilio, the lake,
In springtime, is like the sea,
Wind fishtailing the olive leaves like slash minnows beneath the vineyards,
Ebb and flow of the sunset past Sirmio,
flat voice of the waters

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Retelling their story, again and again, as though to
unburden itself

Of an unforgotten guilt,
and not relieved
Under the soothing hand of the dark,

The clouds over Bardolino dragging the sky for the dead
Bodies of those who refuse to rise,
Their orange robes and flaming bodices trolling across the
hills,

Nightwind by now in the olive trees,
No sound but the wind from anything
under the tired, Italian stars...

And the voice of the waters, starting its ghostly litany.

River of sighs and forgetfulness
(and the secret light Campana saw),
River of bloom-bursts from the moon,
of slivers and broken blades from the moon
In an always-going-away of glints...

Dante and Can Grande once stood here,
Next to the cool breath of S. Anastasia,
watching the cypress candles
Flare in their deep green across the Adige
In the Giusti Gardens.
Before that, in his marble tier,
Catullus once sat through the afternoons.
Before that, God spoke in the rocks...

And now it's my turn to stand

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Watching a different light do the same things on a different
water,
The Adige bearing its gifts
through the April twilight of 1961.

When my father went soldiering, apes dropped from the
trees.
When my mother wrote home from bed, the stars asked for
a pardon.

They're both ghosts now, haunting the chairs and the sugar
chest.

From time to time I hear their voices drifting like smoke
through the living room,
Touching the various things they owned once.
Now they own nothing
and drift like smoke through the living room.

Thinking of Dante, I start to feel
What I think are wings beginning to push out from my
shoulder blades,
And the firm pull of water under my feet.

Thinking of Dante, I think of La Pia,
and Charles Martel
And Cacciaguida inside the great flower of Paradise,
And the thin stem of Purgatory
rooted in Hell.

Thinking of Dante is thinking about the other side,
And the other side of the other side.
It's thinking about the noon noise and the daily light.

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Here is the truth. The wind rose, the sea
Shuffled its blue deck and dealt you a hand:
Blank, blank, blank, blank, blank.
Pelicans rode on the flat back of the waves through the green
afternoon.
Gulls malingered along its breezes.
The huge cross of an airplane's shadow hurried across the
sand,
but no one stayed on it
For long, and nobody said a word.
You could see the island out past the orange gauze of the
smog.

The Big Dipper has followed me all the days of my life.
Under its tin stars my past has come and gone.
Tonight, in the April glaze
and scrimshaw of the sky,
It blesses me once again
With its black water, and sends me on.

After 12 years it's hard to recall
That defining sound the canal made at sundown, slap
Of tide swill on the church steps,
Little runnels of boat wash slipping back from the granite
slabs
In front of Toio's, undulant ripples
Flattening out in small hisses, the oily rainbows regaining
their loose shapes
Silently, mewling and quick yelps of the gulls
Wheeling from shadow into the pink and grey light over the
Zattere,

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Lapping and rocking of water endlessly,
At last like a low drone in the dark shell of the ear
As the night lifted like mist from the Ogni Santi
and San Sebastiano
into the cold pearl of the sky. . .

All that year it lullabied just outside my window
As Venice rode through my sleep like a great spider,
Flawless and Byzantine,
webbed like glass in its clear zinc.
In winter the rain fell
and the locust fell.
In summer the sun rose
Like a whetstone over the steel prows of the gondolas,
Their silver beak-blades rising and falling,
the water whiter than stone.
In autumn the floods came, and oil as thick as leaves in the entry way.
In spring, at evening, under the still-warm umbrellas,
We watched the lights blaze and extend
along the rio,
And watched the black boats approaching, almost without sound.
And still the waters sang lullaby.

I remember myself as a figure among the colonnades,
Leaning from left to right,
one hand in my pocket,
The way the light fell,
the other one holding me up.
I remember myself as a slick on the slick canals,
Going the way the tide went,
The city sunk to her knees in her own reflection.
I remember the way that Pound walked
across San Marco

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At *passeggiata*, as though with no one,
his eyes on the long ago.
I remember the time that Tate came.
And Palazzo Guggenheim
When the floods rose
and the boat took us all the way
Through the front doors and down to the back half
Of *da Montin*, where everyone was, clapping their hands.

What's hard to remember is how the wind moved and the reeds clicked
Behind Torcello,
little bundles of wind in the marsh grass
Chasing their own tails, and skidding across the water.
What's hard to remember is how the electric lights
Were played back, and rose and fell on the black canal
Like swamp flowers,
shrinking and stretching,
Yellow and pale and iron-blue from the oil.
It's hard to remember the way the snow looked
on San Gregorio,
And melting inside the pitch tubs and the smoke of San Trovaso,
The gondolas beached and stripped,
The huge snowflakes planing down through the sea-heavy air
Like dead moths,
drifting and turning...

As always, silence will have the last word,
And Venice will lie like silk
at the edge of the sea and the night sky,

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Albescent under the moon.

Everyone's life is the same life
if you live long enough.

Orioles shuttle like gold thread
through the grey cloth of daylight.
The fog is so low and weighted down
Crows fall through like black notes from the sky.
The orioles stitch and weave.
Somewhere below, the ocean nervously grinds its teeth
As the morning begins to take hold
and the palm trees gleam.

There is an otherness inside us
We never touch,
no matter how far down our hands reach.
It is the past,
with its good looks and *Anytime*, *Anywhere*...
Our prayers go out to it, our arms go out to it
Year after year,
But who can ever remember enough?

Friday again, with its sack of bad dreams
And long-legged birds,
a handful of ashes for this and that
In the streets, and some for the squat piano.

Friday beneath the sky, its little postcards of melancholy
Outside each window,
the engines inside the roses at half speed,

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The huge page of the sea with its one word *despair*,

Fuchsia blossoms littered across the deck,
Unblotted tide pools of darkness beneath the ferns . . .
And still I go on looking,
match after match in the black air.

The lime, electric green of the April sea
off Ischia
Is just a thumb-rub on the window glass between here and there:
And the cloud cap above the volcano
That didn't move when the sea wind moved;
And the morning the doves came, low from the mountain's shadow,
under the sunlight,
Over the damp tops of the vine rows,
Eye-high in a scythe slip that dipped and rose and cut down toward the sea;
And the houses like candy wrappers blown up against the hillside
Above Sant'Angelo,
fuchsia and mauve and cyclamen;
And the story Nicola told,
How the turtle doves come up from Africa
On the desert winds,
how the hunters take the fresh seeds
From their crops and plant them,
The town windows all summer streaked with the nameless blooms . . .

The landscape was always the best part.

Places swim up and sink back, and days do,

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The edges around what really happened
we'll never remember
No matter how hard we stare back at the past:

One April, in downtown Seville,
alone on an Easter morning
Wasted in emerald light from the lemon trees,
I watched a small frog go back and forth on the lily pads
For hours, and still don't know
just what I was staying away from . . .

(And who could forget Milano in '59
all winter under the rain?
Cathedrals for sure,
And dry stops in the Brera,
all of her boulevards ending in vacant lots.

And Hydra and Mykonos,
Barely breaking the calm with their white backs
As they roll over
and flash back down to the dark. . .)

Places swim up and sink back, and days do,
Larger and less distinct each year,
As we are,
and lolling about in the same redress,
Leaves and insects drifting by on their windows.

Rome was never like that,
and the Tiber was never like that,
Nosing down from the Apennines,
color of *cafe-au-lait* as it went through town. . .

Still, I can't remember the name of one street
near Regina Coeli,

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Or one block of the Lungotevere on either side,
Or one name of one shop on Campo dei Fiori.
Only Giordano Bruno,
with his razed look and black caul,
Rises unbidden out of the blank
Unruffled waters of memory,
his martyred bronze
Gleaming and still wet in the single electric light.

I can't remember the colors I said I'd never forget
On Via Giulia at sundown,
The ochres and glazes and bright hennas of each house,
Or a single day from November of 1964.
I can't remember the way the stairs smelled
or the hallway smelled
At Piazza del Biscione.
Or just how the light fell
Through the east-facing window over the wicker chairs there.

I do remember the way the boar hung
in the butcher shop at Christmas
Two streets from the Trevi fountain, a crown of holly and
mistletoe
Jauntily over his left ear.
I do remember the flower paintings
Nodding throughout the May afternoons
on the dining room walls
At Zajac's place.
And the reliquary mornings,
And Easter, and both Days of the Dead . . .

At noon in the English Cemetery no one's around.
Keats is off to the left, in an open view.
Shelley and Someone's son are straight up ahead.

With their marble breath and their marble names,
the sun in a quick squint through the trees,

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They lie at the edge of everywhere,
Rome like a stone cloud at the back of their eyes.

Time is the villain in most tales,
and here, too,
Lowering its stiff body into the water.
Its landscape is the resurrection of the word,
No end of it,
the petals of wreckage in everything.

I've been sitting here tracking the floor plan
of a tiny, mottled log spider
Across the front porch of the cabin,
And now she's under my chair,
off to her own devices,
Leaving me mine, and I start watching the two creeks

Come down through the great meadow
Under the lodge pole pine and the willow run,
The end of June beginning to come clear in the clouds,
Shadows like drowned men where the creeks go under the hill . . .

Last night, in the flood run of the moon, the bullbats
Diving out of the yellow sky
with their lonesome and jungly whistling,
I watched, as I've watched before, the waters send up their smoke signals of blue mist,
And thought, for the 1st time,

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I half-understood what they keep on trying to say.

But now I'm not sure.
Behind my back, the spider has got her instructions
And carries them out.
Flies drone, wind back-combs the marsh grass, swallows bank
and climb.
Everything I can see knows just what to do,

Even the dragonfly, hanging like lapis lazuli in the sun . . .

I can't remember enough.

How the hills, for instance, at dawn in Kingsport
In late December in 1962 were black
against a sky
The color of pale fish blood and water that ran to white
As I got ready to leave home for the 100th time,
My mother and father asleep,
my sister asleep,
Carter's Valley as dark as the inside of a bone
Below the ridge,
the 1st knobs of the Great Smokies
Beginning to stick through the sunrise,
The hard pull of a semi making the grade up US 11W,
The cold with its metal teeth ticking against the window,
The long sigh of the screen door stop,
My headlights starting to disappear
in the day's new turning . . .

I'll never be able to.

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Sunday, a brute bumblebee working the clover tops
Next to the step I'm sitting on,
sticking his huge head
Into each tiny, white envelope.
The hot sun of July, in the high Montana air, bastes a sweet
glaze
On the tamarack and meadow grass.
In the blue shadows
moist curls of the lupin glide
And the bog lilies extinguish their mellow lamps . . .

Sunday, a *Let us pray* from the wind, a glint
Of silver among the willows.
The lilacs begin to bleed
In their new sleep, and the golden vestments of morning
Lift for a moment, then settle back into place.
The last of the dog roses offers itself by the woodpile.
Everything has its work,
everything written down
In a second-hand grace of solitude and tall trees . . .

August licks at the pine trees.
Sun haze, and little fugues from the creek.
Fern-sleep beneath the green skirt of the marsh.

I always imagine a mouth
Starting to open its blue lips
Inside me, an arm
curving sorrowfully over an open window

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At evening, and toads leaping out of the wet grass.

Again the silence of flowers.
Again the faint notes of piano music back in the woods.
How easily summer fills the room.

The life of this world is wind.
Wind-blown we come, and wind-blown we go away.
All that we look on is windfall.
All we remember is wind.

Pickwick was never the wind . . .

It's what we forget that defines us, and stays in the same
place,
And waits to be rediscovered.
Somewhere in all that network of rivers and roads and silt
hills,
A city I'll never remember,
its walls the color of pure light,
Lies in the August heat of 1935,
In Tennessee, the bottom land slowly becoming a lake.
It lies in a landscape that keeps my imprint
Forever,
and stays unchanged, and waits to be filled back in.
Someday I'll find it out
And enter my old outline as though for the 1st time,

And lie down, and tell no one.

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slip slip slip slip slip. In sixteen years we've never had rent bills but now we have rent bills. He's raised the rent, and lowered the heat. The new owner creeps into the house by night and takes heat away with him. He wants us out, out. If we were gone, the building would be decontrolled. The rents would climb into the air like steam.

Bicycles out of the halls, says the new owner. Shopping carts out of the halls. My halls.

The new owner stands in profile in the street in front of our building. He looks up the street, then down the street. This wondrous street where our friends and neighbors live in Christian, Jewish and in some instances Islamic peace. The new owner is writing the Apartments-Unfurnished ads of the future, in his head.

The new owner fires the old super, simply because the old super is a wholehearted [redacted] widowed shot-up black Korean 65% disability drunk. vet/ There is a shouting confrontation in the basement. The new owner promises the police. The old super is locked out. A new super is hired who does not put out the garbage, does (NOT) [redacted] mop the halls. Roaches appear because the new owner has stopped the exterminating service. The new owner wants us out.

We whisper to the new owner, through the walls: Go away! Own something else! Don't own this building! Try the Sun Belt! Try Alaska, Hawaii! Sail away, new owner, sail away!

The new owner arrives, takes out his keys, opens the locked basement. The new owner is standing in the basement, owning the basement, with its single dangling bare bulb and the slightly busted souvenirs of all our children's significant progress. He is taking away the heat, carrying it out with him under his coat, a few pounds [redacted] at a time, and bringing in with him, a few hundred at a time, his hired roaches.

A Donald Barthelme manuscript page from a story called "The New Owner."

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Thomas Victor

Donald Barthelme
The Art of Fiction LXVI

Asked for his biography, Donald Barthelme said, "I don't think it would sustain a person's attention for a moment." He was born into a deep Depression (1931) and raised from it into Houston, Texas. There he endured a normal childhood, attended the University of Houston, studied philosophy under Maurice Natanson, and worked on a local newspaper. Then he was drafted, served in Korea, and returned to Houston, which he soon left for New York City. There he did editorial work, especially for Location, *and his odd short fictions made themselves known. Soon he became the most startling of the staid* New Yorker*'s regular contributors, and he still is.*

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He lives in New York City—"I move around quite happily. Alertly, but happily"—in a second-floor apartment in the West Village, cannily located between St. Vincent's Hospital and a self-confessedly famous pizza parlor. The typical Barthelme interview is terse if not abrupt, but to this one he devoted large chunks of a weekend. He began at a dinner with fellow writer Ann Beattie and others, continued for two days in his spacious livingroom, and ended symmetrically at an elegant dinner prepared by his wife, Marion.

The talk was continuous and preferably about someone other than himself. He praised many favorite writers, including Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Kleist, Kafka, Hemingway, S.J. Perelman, Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, and Beckett. ("Beckett, I suppose, made it possible for me to write. . . .") He spoke enthusiastically of philosophers and psychologists, and of many contemporary writers. He refused the role of esoteric writer addressing a coterie audience. ("I assume that they're kind of worn-down people like you and me. . . plain walking-around citizens.") And like all sensible artists he fudged the conceptualization of his story-writing. ("All the magic comes from the unconscious. If there is *any magic.")*

The transcribed interview, with traffic noises, the clinking of glasses, and Marion Barthelme's cheery voice still echoing in the background, was sent dutifully to the author. Many moons later and after much brooding and revision the following dialogue emerged, cleansed of mere actuality and posing its figures in no landscape. The Platonic Idea of an interview. But one may still intuit the old knobkerrie meditatively rubbed on the sleeve of the rumpled tweed jacket, the smoky setter asleep before the faithful fire. . . and now the writer's ascetic features, framed in a square Danish Calvinist's beard, soften benignly as the interviewer ventures his first academic question:

INTERVIEWER

You're often linked with Barth, Pynchon, Vonnegut and others of that ilk. Does this seem to you inhuman bondage or is

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there reason in it?

BARTHELME

They're all people I admire. I wouldn't say we were alike as parking tickets. Some years ago the *Times* was fond of dividing writers into teams; there was an implication that the *Times* wanted to see gladiatorial combat, or at least a soccer game. I was always pleased with the team I was assigned to.

INTERVIEWER

Who are the people with whom you have close personal links?

BARTHELME

Well, Grace Paley, who lives across the street, and Kirk and Faith Sale, who live in this building—we have a little block association. Roger Angell, who's my editor at the *New Yorker*, Harrison Starr, who's a film producer, and my family. In the last few years several close friends have died.

INTERVIEWER

How do you feel about literary biography? Do you think your own biography would clarify the stories and novels?

BARTHELME

Not a great deal. There's not a strong autobiographical strain in my fiction. A few bits of fact here and there. The passage in the story "See the Moon?" where the narrator compares the advent of a new baby to somebody giving him a battleship to wash and care for was written the night before my daughter was born, a biographical fact which illuminates not very much. My grandmother and grandfather make an appearance in a piece I did not long ago. He was a lumber dealer in Galveston and also had a ranch on the Guadalupe River not too far from San Antonio, a wonderful place to ride and hunt, talk to the catfish and try to make the windmill run backward. There are a few minnows from the Guadalupe in that story, which mostly accompanies the title character through a rather depressing

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New York day. But when it appeared I immediately began getting calls from friends, some of whom I hadn't heard from in some time and all of whom were offering Tylenol and bandages. The assumption was that identification of the author with the character was not only permissible but invited. This astonished me. One uses one's depressions as one uses everything else, but what I was doing was writing a story. Merrily merrily merrily merrily.

Overall, very *little* autobiography, I think.

INTERVIEWER

Was your childhood shaped in any particular way?

BARTHELME

I think it was colored to some extent by the fact that my father was an architect of a particular kind—we were enveloped in Modernism. The house we lived in, which he'd designed, was Modern and the furniture was Modern and the pictures were Modern and the books were Modern. He gave me, when I was fourteen or fifteen, a copy of Marcel Raymond's *From Baudelaire to Surrealism*, I think he'd come across it in the Wittenborn catalogue. The introduction is by Harold Rosenberg, whom I met and worked with sixteen or seventeen years later, when we did the magazine *Location* here in New York.

My mother studied English and drama at the University of Pennsylvania, where my father studied architecture. She was a great influence in all sorts of ways, a wicked wit.

INTERVIEWER

Music is one of the few areas of human activity that escapes distortion in your writing. An odd comparison: music is for you what animals were for Céline.

BARTHELME

There were a lot of classical records in the house. Outside, what the radio yielded when I was growing up was mostly Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys; I heard him so much that I failed to appreciate him, failed to appreciate country music in

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general. Now I'm very fond of it. I was interested in jazz and we used to go to black clubs to hear people like Erskine Hawkins who were touring—us poor little pale little white boys were offered a generous sufferance, tucked away in a small space behind the bandstand with an enormous black cop posted at the door. In other places you could hear people like the pianist Peck Kelly, a truly legendary figure, or Lionel Hampton or once in a great while Louis Armstrong or Woody Herman. I was sort of drenched in all this. After a time a sort of crazed scholarship overtakes you and you can recite band rosters for 1935 as others can list baseball teams for the same year.

INTERVIEWER

What did you learn from this, if anything?

BARTHELME

Maybe something about making a statement, about placing emphases within a statement or introducing variations. You'd hear some of these guys take a tired old tune like "Who's Sorry Now?" and do the most incredible things with it, make it beautiful, literally make it new. The interest and the drama were in the formal manipulation of the rather slight material. And they were heroic figures, you know, very romantic. Hokie Mokie in "The King of Jazz" comes out of all that.

INTERVIEWER

Are there writers to whose work you look forward?

BARTHELME

Many. Gass, Hawkes, Barth, Ashbery, Calvino, Ann Beattie—too many to remember. I liked Walker Percy's new book *The Second Coming* enormously. The weight of knowledge is extraordinary, ranging from things like how the shocks on a Mercedes are constituted to how a nineteenth-century wood-burning stove is put together. When the hero's doctors diagnosed *wahnsinnige Sehnsucht* or "inappropriate longings" as what was wrong with him I like to fell off my chair. That's too beautiful to be real but with Percy it might be. Let's

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see. . . Handke, Thomas Bernhard, Max Frisch, Marquez.

INTERVIEWER

Even *Autumn of the Patriarch*?

BARTHELME

After *One Hundred Years of Solitude* it was hard to imagine that he could do another book on that scale, but he did it. There were technical maneuvers in *Autumn of the Patriarch*—the business of the point of view changing within a given sentence, for instance—that I thought very effective, almost 100% effective. It was his genius to stress the sorrows of the dictator, the angst of the monster. The challenge was his own previous book and I think he met it admirably.

It's amazing the way previous work can animate new work, amazing and reassuring. Tom Hess used to say that the only adequate criticism of a work of art is another work of art. It may also be the case that any genuine work of art generates new work. I suspect that Marquez's starting point was *The Tin Drum*, somehow, that Günter Grass gave him a point of departure. . . that the starting point for the essential Beckett was *Bouvard and Pecuchet* and that Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* is a fantasia on the theme of Hemingway in Africa. This is not the anxiety but the pleasure of influence.

INTERVIEWER

You don't, then, believe in entropy?

BARTHELME

Entropy belongs to Pynchon. I read recently that somebody had come forward with evidence that the process is not irreversible. There is abroad a distinct feeling that everything's getting worse; Christopher Lasch speaks of it, and so do many other people. I don't think we have the sociological index that would allow us to measure this in any meaningful way, but the feeling is there as a cultural fact. I *feel* entropy—Kraus on backache is a favorite text around here.

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INTERVIEWER

Do you see anything getting better—art, for instance?

BARTHELME

I don't think you can talk about progress in art—movement, but not progress. You can speak of a point on a line for the purpose of locating things, but it's a horizontal line, not a vertical one. Similarly the notion of an avant-garde is a bit off. The function of the advance guard in military terms is exactly that of the rear guard, to protect the main body, which translates as the status quo.

You can speak of political progress, social progress, of course—you may not *see* much of it, but it can be talked about.

INTERVIEWER

Well, you've established yourself as an old fogey.

BARTHELME

So be it.

INTERVIEWER

Your own influences—whom would you like to cite as your spiritual ancestors?

BARTHELME

They come in assorted pairs. Perelman and Hemingway. Kierkegaard and Sabatini. Kafka and Kleist. Kleist was clearly one of Kafka's fathers. Rabelais and Zane Grey. The Dostoevsky of *Notes from Underground*. A dozen Englishmen. The Surrealists, both painters and poets. A great many film people, Buñuel in particular. It's always a stew, isn't it? Errol Flynn ought to be in there somewhere, and so should Big Sid Catlett, the drummer.

INTERVIEWER

Why Errol Flynn?

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BARTHELME

Because he's part of my memory of Sabatini, Sabatini fleshed out. He was in the film version of *Captain Blood*, and *The Sea Hawk*. He should have done *Scaramouche* but Stewart Granger did it instead, as I recall.

INTERVIEWER

You have a story called "Captain Blood."

BARTHELME

A pastiche of Sabatini, not particularly of that book but all of Sabatini. You are reminded, I hope, of the pleasure Sabatini gives you or has given you. The piece is in no sense a parody, rather it's very much an *hommage*. An attempt to present, or recall, the essence of Sabatini. Also it hopes to be an *itself*.

INTERVIEWER

What about the more awkward question of writers standing in your way?

BARTHELME

I think deep admirations force you *away* from the work admired, as well as having the generating influence we've mentioned. Joyce may have done this for Beckett, Marquez may do this for young Latin American writers—force them to do something that is not Marquez.

INTERVIEWER

But hasn't everything been done?

BARTHELME

One can't believe that because it's not profitable. The situation of painting is instructive. Painters, especially American painters since the Second World War, have been much more troubled, beset by formal perplexity, than American writers. They've been a laboratory for everybody. Some new attitudes have emerged. What seems clear is that if you exacerbate a problem, make it worse, new solutions are generated. Ad

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Reinhardt is an example. Barnett Newman, proceeding by subtraction, or Frank Stella rushing in the other direction.

INTERVIEWER

Why this constant invocation of the word "new"?

BARTHELME

It equates with being able to feel something rather than with novelty per se, it's a kind of shorthand for discovery. Probably a bad choice of words. Rosenberg's *The Tradition of the New* deals precisely with the anomalies involved.

INTERVIEWER

Has this anything to do with your continuing attempt to reexamine or complicate your style or procedures?

BARTHELME

You isolate aspects of the process, look at them separately, worry about this and then worry about that. It's like a sculptor suddenly deciding to use rust. Rust was not appreciated at its full value until rather recently. Roger Angell once asked me why I'd single-spaced a story I'd offered him and I told him that I was trying to keep myself interested.

INTERVIEWER

You said last night that you enjoyed teaching because the young writers talk about their concerns, about what's happening to them, that you learn from them.

BARTHELME

And they learn from each other. I've just read an article that strongly implies that teaching writing is a dismal racket, an impoverishing fraud, and maybe it is as practiced in some venues, but I'd hate this to be taken as generally true. At City College, where I teach a graduate workshop, the writing students are fully the equals in seriousness and accomplishment of the other graduate students. Maybe writing can't be taught, but editing *can* be taught—prayer, fasting and self-

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mutilation. Notions of the lousy can be taught. Ethics.

All of this is new in universities, didn't exist when I was in school, but it's hardly a racket.

INTERVIEWER

Your feelings about the new are ambivalent. . . .

BARTHELME

I'm ever-hopeful, but remember that I was exposed early to an almost religious crusade, the Modern movement in architecture, which, putting it as kindly as possible, has not turned out quite as expected. The Bauhaus, Mies van der Rohe and his followers, Frank Lloyd Wright and his followers, Le Corbusier, all envisioned not just great buildings but an architecture that would engender a radical improvement in human existence. The buildings were to act on society, change it in positive ways. None of this happened and in fact a not insignificant totalitarian bent manifested itself. There's a brand-new state university campus not far from here that the students call, with perfect justice, Alphaville. The architects somehow managed eeriness. Now we find phrases like "good design," or "planning," quite loaded, quite strange.

There is an ambivalence. Reynolds Price in the *Times* said of my story "The New Music" that it was about as new as the toothache. He apparently didn't get the joke, which is that there is always a new music—the new music shows up about every ten minutes. Not like the toothache. More like hiccups.

INTERVIEWER

Which reminds me: some of your detractors say that you're merely fashionable.

BARTHELME

Well, the mere has always been a useful category.

INTERVIEWER

That you're a jackdaw, and your principle of selection is whatever glitters most.

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BARTHELME

I weep and tear my hair. And disagree.

INTERVIEWER

Let's look at a specific jackdaw's nest, the barricade in "The Indian Uprising."

BARTHELME

I don't see anything particularly fashionable. The table made from a hollow-core door may be a 1960s reference but aren't people still making them?

INTERVIEWER

But your barricade is not intended as straightforward realism; these things are artifacts of a certain culture.

BARTHELME

An archeological slice. Not much glitter.

INTERVIEWER

Won't it require scholarly annotation in the future?

BARTHELME

I'd say no. If you read *The Swiss Family Robinson* and you're reading about what they unpack from the pinnace as they shuttle from ship to shore you don't need any footnotes, even though there may be 400 pounds of tallow in the cargo. You have a vague recollection that it's used to make candles.

Actually I think the jackdaw business is a function of appearing in the *New Yorker* with some frequency. People read the fiction with after-images of Rolls Royces and Rolexes still sizzling in their eyes. Rare is the reviewer who can resist mentioning the magazine's ads when talking about the fiction. One is gilded by association.

INTERVIEWER

Suppose we turn things around. Suppose I say that when I read that story I'm not at all concerned about whether people

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made tables from hollow-core doors in the 1960s. Rather, I'm interested in the speaker, who in the metaphorical context of the story is besieged by Comanches.

BARTHELME

Is besieged by very much more than Comanches, but also by Comanches. He's not meant to be a walking-around person so much as a target, a butt. The arrows of the Comanches but also sensory insult, political insult, there are references to the war there, to race, to torture, jingoism.... But none of the references in the story were picked at random, and none are used simply as decor. If they seem random it's probably because the range of reference is rather wide for a short piece—you have Patton and Frank Wedekind and the Seventh Cavalry coexisting on the same plane—but the crowding is part of the design, *is* the design.

INTERVIEWER

What starts your stories off?

BARTHELME

It's various. For instance, I've just done a piece about a Chinese emperor, the so-called First Emperor, Ch'in Shih Huang Ti. This came directly from my wife's research for a piece she was doing on medical politics in Chinatown—she had accumulated all sorts of material on Chinese culture, Chinese history, and I began picking through it, jackdaw-like. This was the emperor who surrounded his tomb with that vast army of almost full-scale terra cotta soldiers the Chinese discovered just a few years ago. The tomb, as far as I know, has yet to be fully excavated, but the scale of the discovery gives you some clear hints as to the size of the man's imagination, his ambition. As I learned more about him—"learned" in quotation marks, much of what I was reading was dubious history—I got a sense of the emperor hurrying from palace to palace, I gave him two hundred some-odd palaces, scampering, almost, tending to his projects, intrigues, machinations. He's horribly, horribly *pressed for time*, both actually and in the sense that many of his

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efforts are strategies against mortality. The tomb itself is a strategy, as is the imposition of design on the lives of his people, his specifications as to how wide hats shall be, how wide carriages shall be, and so forth.

"The Emperor" might be considered as another version of the story I did about Cortes and Montezuma, and both as footnotes to *The Dead Father*, another emperor.

INTERVIEWER

You do your homework, in other words.

BARTHELME

Everybody does, I think. Research yields things that you can react to, either accept or disagree with. My Montezuma and Cortes are both possibly nobler figures than responsible historians would allow, but I hope not implausible. There are conflicting versions as to how Montezuma died. I have him killed by a stone flying through the air, presumably from the hand of one of his subjects. The alternative is that the Spaniards killed him. I prefer to believe the former.

INTERVIEWER

You take the Cortes-Montezuma friendship to have been a reality, not just a matter of political manipulation?

BARTHELME

There seems to be little question that Cortes was a master manipulator. Still, he seems to have been genuinely impressed by Montezuma. Bernal, as you read his account of the Conquest, enlarges in a very respectful way on Montezuma's qualities, as priest-king at the center of an elaborate religious/political establishment, about which Cortes was wonderfully obtuse. It's as if you marched into present-day Salt Lake City at the head of your brave little group, listened politely and with interest to a concert by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, sitting in the front row, and then whipped out your sword and claimed the state of Utah for Scientology.

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INTERVIEWER

Suppose a reader took the story's limousines and detectives to mean that you're being comic about it?

BARTHELME

The limousines are only a way of making you see chariots or palanquins.

INTERVIEWER

What about the woman's golden buttocks?

BARTHELME

A way of allowing you to see buttocks. If I didn't have roaches big as ironing boards in the story I couldn't show Cortes and Montezuma holding hands, it would be merely sentimental. You look around for offsetting material, things that tell the reader that although X is happening, X is to be regarded in the light of Y.

INTERVIEWER

Aldous Huxley argued that Ophelia could not appear on stage naked. He opposed the necessary conditions of tragedy to those of comedy, instancing the scene in *Tom Jones* in which Sophia Western falls off her horse, baring her comely buttocks to the admiring lookers-on.

BARTHELME

I can imagine a tragic nakedness, even on the stage. A little hop past the pathetic.

INTERVIEWER

Why don't you write tragedy?

BARTHELME

I'm fated to deal in mixtures, slumgullions, which preclude tragedy, which requires a pure line. It's a habit of mind, a perversity. Tom Hess used to tell a story, maybe from Lewis Carroll, I don't remember, about an enraged mob storming

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the palace shouting "More taxes! Less bread!" As soon as I hear a proposition I immediately consider its opposite. A double-minded man—makes for mixtures.

INTERVIEWER

Apparently the Yiddish theatre, to which Kafka was very addicted, includes as a typical bit of comedy two clowns, more or less identical, who appear even in sad scenes—the parting of two lovers, for instance—and behave comically as the audience is weeping. This shows up especially in *The Castle*.

BARTHELME

The assistants.

INTERVIEWER

And the audience doesn't know what to do.

BARTHELME

The confusing signals, the impurity of the signal, gives you verisimilitude. As when you attend a funeral and notice, against your will, that it's being *poorly done*.

INTERVIEWER

Once you've written a story, is there anyone to whom you show it?

BARTHELME

First to my wife; if she has a bad reaction, then I go back and wonder what I did wrong. Occasionally, I'll show something to Grace Paley. The scene in *The Dead Father* where Tom and Julie make love I showed to Grace because I'd never written a sexual set piece before. She said she thought it was okay.

INTERVIEWER

Why do writers have such a hard time writing about sex?

BARTHELME

Faint equivalents can sometimes be found. In the passage

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mentioned I relied on verbal extravagance, but a cold extravagance. Or it can be rendered obliquely—an adolescent's mental image of his or her parents making love, which must be something on the order of crocodiles mating.

INTERVIEWER

When you've finished a story you send it to Roger Angell at the *New Yorker*.

BARTHELME

Yes. He often makes very acute suggestions, usually criticism of particular lines.

INTERVIEWER

Do they ever turn anything down?

BARTHELME

Of course. Sometimes a piece has not been thought through by its author, sometimes they're just wrong. I'll look at a piece that they've turned down very suspiciously, though.

INTERVIEWER

On occasion you have arranged and rearranged stories in a collection up till the last possible moment, and you also make considerable changes in individual stories—notably in "The New Music," to cite a recent instance. On what bases?

BARTHELME

The order of pieces in a given book is mostly a matter of trying to make sure they don't get in each other's way. Much like hanging pictures for a show. Some pictures fight other pictures, not because either is a bad picture, but because the scale fights or the color fights. "The New Music" was originally two stories with the same characters. For the book version I added about six pages of new material, there was more to be said, and combined them. A matter of not getting it right the first time or even the second time.

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INTERVIEWER

This is one of the ten or more dialogue stories you've done recently. Why dialogues?

BARTHELME

The opportunities are those of poetry without the stern responsibilities. Dialogues are rather easy to write but there are some fine points. The sentence rhythms are rather starkly exposed, have to be weirdly musical or you send the reader off to Slumberland posthaste.

INTERVIEWER

They're Beckett-y. Are they Beckett-y?

BARTHELME

Certainly they couldn't exist without the example of Beckett's plays. But I have other fish to fry. The dialogues in *Great Days* are less abstract than those between the two women in *The Dead Father*, which aren't particularly reminiscent of Beckett and preceded them. There's an urge toward abstraction that's very seductive—

INTERVIEWER

Art about art?

BARTHELME

No, I mean the sort of thing you find in Gertrude Stein and hardly anywhere else. Phillipe Sollers, the *Tel Quel* man, approaches it in his book *Paradis*, of which I've read some excerpts in translation. I'm talking about a pointillist technique, where what you get is not adjacent dots of yellow and blue which optically merge to give you green but merged meanings, whether from words placed side by side in a seemingly arbitrary way or phrases similarly arrayed, bushels of them. . . .

INTERVIEWER

An example?

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BARTHELME

"Petronius mothballs." Of course you can do this all day long and the results will be fully as poor as the specimen furnished. Still it's a North Sea to be explored.

INTERVIEWER

A computer could make that sort of combination.

BARTHELME

But the lovable computer doesn't know when it's made a joke. The worm in the Apple. The only time I've ever tried this kind of thing at any length was in a piece called "Bone Bubbles" which consisted of blocks of phrases which rubbing together had a kind of irritating life. I wouldn't claim that it was a great success; Henry Robbins, my book editor at the time, wanted me to leave it out of *City Life*, but it was included, as a sort of lab report.

Computer people have a phrase, "garbage in, garbage out," which reflects the kind of thinking necessary to their work; artists on the other hand occasionally refer to the "happy accident"—a different style of thinking.

INTERVIEWER

But this is not problem-solving thinking.

BARTHELME

No, it's not. But the task is not so much to solve problems as to propose questions. To quote Karl Kraus, "a writer is someone who can make a riddle out of an answer." There's also an element of reportage, the description of new situations or conditions, but that's pretty much a matter of identifying them rather than talking about solutions. Baudelaire noticing that the boulevards of Paris were no longer a means of getting from here to there but had become more like theater lobbies, places to be, and writing about that. The search is for a question that will generate light and heat.

All this has to do with a possible extension of means. Abstraction is a little heaven I can't quite get to. How do you

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achieve, for example, "messy"? De Kooning can do "messy" by making a charcoal stroke over paint and then smudging same with his talented thumb—in prose the same gesture tends to look like simple ineptitude. De Kooning has a whole vocabulary of bad behavior which enables him to set up the most fruitful kinds of contradictions. It frees him. I have trouble rendering breaking glass.

INTERVIEWER

What about the moral responsibility of the artist? I take it that you are a responsible artist (as opposed, say, to X, Y, and Z), but all is irony, comic distortion, foreign voices, fragmentation. Where in all this evasion of the straightforward does responsibility display itself?

BARTHELME

It's not the straightforward that's being evaded but the too-true. I might fix your eye firmly and announce "Thou shalt not mess around with thy neighbor's wife." You might then nod and say to yourself, quite so. We might then lunch at the local chili parlor and say scurrilous things about X, Y, and Z. But it will not have escaped your notice that my statement has hardly enlarged your cosmos, that I've been, in the largest sense, responsible to neither art, life, nor adultery.

I believe that my every sentence trembles with morality in that each attempts to engage the problematic rather than to present a proposition to which all reasonable men must agree. The engagement might be very small, a word modifying another word, the substitution of "mess around" for "covet," which undresses adultery a bit. I think the paraphrasable content in art is rather slight—"tiny," as de Kooning puts it. The *way* things are done is crucial, as the inflection of a voice is crucial. The change of emphasis from the what to the how seems to me to be the major impulse in art since Flaubert, and it's not merely formalism, it's not at all superficial, it's an attempt to reach truth, and a very rigorous one. You don't get, following this path, a moral universe set out in ten propositions, but we already have that. And the attempt is sufficiently

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skeptical about itself. In this century there's been much stress placed not upon what we know but on knowing that our methods are themselves questionable—our Song of Songs is the Uncertainty Principle.

Also, it's entirely possible to fail to understand or actively misunderstand what an artist is doing. I remember going through a very large Barnett Newman show years ago with Tom Hess and Harold Rosenberg, we used to go to shows after long lunches, those wicked lunches which are no more, and I walked through the show like a certifiable idiot, couldn't understand their enthusiasm. I admired the boldness, the color and so on but inwardly I was muttering "wallpaper, wallpaper, very fine wallpaper but wallpaper." I was wrong, didn't get the core of Newman's enterprise, what Tom called Newman's effort toward the sublime. Later I began to understand. One doesn't take in Proust or Canada on the basis of a single visit.

To return to your question: if I looked you straight in the eye and said, "The beauty of women makes of adultery a serious and painful duty," then we'd have the beginning of a useful statement.

INTERVIEWER

Can you point out a specific too-true evaded in a specific story?

BARTHELME

Perhaps in "The Death of Edward Lear." Charming into ferocious, Edward Lear into King Lear.

INTERVIEWER

Wordsworth spoke of growing up "Fostered alike by beauty and by fear," and he put fearful experiences first; but he also said that his primary subject was "the mind of Man." Don't you write more about the mind than about the external world?

BARTHELME

In a commonsense way, you write about the impingement of one upon the other—my subjectivity bumping into other

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subjectivities, or into the Prime Rate. You exist for me in my perception of you (and in some rough, Raggedy Andy way, for yourself, of course). That's what's curious when people say, of writers, this one's a realist, this one's a surrealist, this one's a super-realist, and so forth. In fact, everybody's a realist offering true accounts of the activity of mind. There are only realists.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever been mugged?

BARTHELME

Not even in print. (*Considers*) Once in print, by Gore Vidal. He likes to straighten out us uppity young people.

INTERVIEWER

In *The Dead Father* you edge into Kafka country and suggest that God has shown himself to be a bad father. But you seem not to believe in God, whereas Kafka did.

BARTHELME

Well, actually the Holy Ghost is my main man, as we say. I don't think I've ever had much to say about God except as a locus of complaint, a convention, someone to rail against. *The Dead Father* suggests that the process of becoming has bound up in it the experience of many other consciousnesses, the most important of which are in a law-giving relation to the self. The characters complain about this in what I hope is an interesting fashion. Cursing what is is a splendid ground for a writer—witness Céline.

INTERVIEWER

Beckett's pronouncements on art imply something curious: that artists who in the past assumed and sought to convey ultimate truths (as Dante did) were quite right, but that in our own time these truths don't exist and therefore the artist must proceed differently. Do you share that sense?

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BARTHELME

In the dialogues with Duthuit, Beckett, as you know, rejects what can be accomplished "on the plane of the feasible"—he seems to be asking for an art adequate to the intuition of Nothingness. I don't want to oversimplify his esthetics, about which I know nothing firsthand, but the problem appears to be not one of announcing truths, or that truths do or do not exist, but of hewing to the intuition, which seems central, and yet getting some work done. Beckett's work is an embarrassment to the Void. I think of the line from the German writer Heimito von Doderer: "At first you break windows. Then you become a window yourself."

INTERVIEWER

Why do you live in New York?

BARTHELME

Because in American terms, it's an old city. I think writers like old cities and are made very nervous by new cities. I lived in Copenhagen for a bit more than a year and was very happy there. At moments, in New York, I like all the filth on the streets, it reminds me of Kurt Schwitters. Schwitters used to hang around printing plants and fish things out of waste barrels, stuff that had been overprinted or used during make-ready, and he'd employ this rich accidental material in his collages. I saw a very large Schwitters show some years ago and almost everything in it reminded me of New York. Garbage in, art out.

INTERVIEWER

Do you eavesdrop?

BARTHELME

More than is decent. Out of context you frequently get instant Dada. I once overheard a woman in a restaurant on 55th saying earnestly to her companion, "But Henry, I've never *taught* in the daytime before." *The Teacher From the Black Lagoon.*

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INTERVIEWER

You said that you're working on a novel.

BARTHELME

Perpetually.

INTERVIEWER

What's the attraction of the form?

BARTHELME

The sustained involvement with a single project. I don't find them particularly easy to write. *Snow White* is strictly speaking a novella, and *The Dead Father* isn't terribly long. The new one—the working title is *Ghosts*—will be longer, I think. I've made a lot of false starts, souvenirs of which are sometimes published. "The Emerald," which is about a witch who is impregnated by the man in the moon and gives birth to a 7,335-carat emerald, was going to be a novel. But I couldn't sustain it, and it finally appeared as a long story.

INTERVIEWER

What's your greatest weakness as a writer?

BARTHELME

That I don't offer enough emotion. That's one of the things people come to fiction for, and they're not wrong. I mean emotion of the better class, hard to come by. Also, I can't resist making jokes, although that's much more under control than it used to be. And of course these weaknesses have to do with each other—jokes short-circuit emotion. I particularly prize, but can't often produce, a kind of low-key emotional touch that speaks volumes. At the end of Ann Beattie's *Falling in Place*, for example, Jonathan's made a wish and Cynthia asks Spangle what he wished for and the reply is "The usual, I guess." That's beautiful.

INTERVIEWER

Is there any subject you'd like to entertain, but haven't yet?

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BARTHELME

We spoke earlier about fear, a tricky terrain. There are things to be said about it. If you go through the psychological literature there's not much that's very good—lots of stuff on anxiety, very little on fear. There are aphorisms. Nietzsche said that civilization makes all good things available even to cowards, sound enough but also contemptuous. It's a difficult subject, but of our moment. Little Redcap once set out with her basket for grandmother's house in perfect confidence; nowadays we'd send her in a Brink's truck. This is a strange time. I was in a cab not long ago and the cabbie cut a corner too close and a well-dressed man with an attaché case standing on the corner banged the rear fender with his hand—a very New York gesture. So the cabbie jumps out of the cab ready to fight and the man with the attaché case opens his coat with one hand like a flasher and he's wearing a .38 in a shoulder holster. This is on Park Avenue!

INTERVIEWER

What did the cabbie do?

BARTHELME

Backed off, quite sensibly. Anyhow, there's all sorts of fear around and I haven't even mentioned the contributions of governments. Something to be done there but I haven't figured out what.

INTERVIEWER

You keep up in philosophy and psychology, do you not?

BARTHELME

Not really. I have a very mercantile approach, I read whatever I think might be useful, might start something. I read other writers to discover what they do well; that helps me, reminds me why I got into this peculiar business in the first place. It's most unsystematic.

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INTERVIEWER

One of your depressed admirers contends that Hogo, in *Snow White*, told the truth about male-female relationships.

BARTHELME

Maybe *a* truth. Hogo's a thoroughly vile creature, or critter, and can be counted upon to take the vilest possible view of things.

INTERVIEWER

He corrupts the seven men.

BARTHELME

He's taken into partnership; that they're corrupted is not clear. He's efficient, a comment on efficiency.

INTERVIEWER

Snow White at once anticipates and superseded much feminist writing. Would you like to say something about its feminist themes? About the replacement of the wicked stepmother with a coeval of Snow White?

BARTHELME

Changing the stepmother-figure was a way of placing the emphasis on Snow White's network of relationships with the seven cohabitors. Her chief plaint is that the seven of them only add up, for her, to possibly two real men—this arithmetic is the center of the novel, gives rise to the question of what *real men* are, what the attitudes of the male characters mean. The situation of the horsewife can then be examined in regard to this, the situation of the potential world-redeeming hero examined.

I think that in this book the prose is far too worked, wrought, banged upon, too many jokes—a nervousness on my part that shouldn't be there. I don't regret having published it or anything of that sort, but it could have been better.

INTERVIEWER

Let's look at another passage, this one from "The Rise of

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Capitalism." "As a flower moves toward the florist, women toward men who are not good for them. Self-actualization is not to be achieved in terms of another person, but you don't know that, when you begin."

BARTHELME

Not a particularly tender passage. My mental image of the voice while writing that piece was that of a loudspeaker rigged to a pole in some sort of re-education camp. Incessant sloganizing, a metallic drone, personal messages mixed with political messages, propaganda, left propaganda, in this case. "Cultural underdevelopment of the worker, as a technique of domination, is found everywhere under late capitalism." If I may quote.

INTERVIEWER

But it's not expressed sincerely.

BARTHELME

It is and it isn't. Everything in the story is true enough, but is undercut by the loudspeaker-like tone. What this means —forgive me for telling you what this means in so many words— is that we all know these propositions are true (I'm referring now to the political propositions) but that nothing, nothing, will be done about them. I think sincerity is betokened by the viciousness of expression; it's an angry piece.

The lines you quoted are of a different kind—a different kind of proposition not unlike the first kind but having to do with the personal rather than the social. And these sentences work differently. The effect of the first, if any, is generated by its majestic certainty. In the second, "self-actualization" is at once a lump of jargon and one of those puffy ideas that nevertheless have some trace of value. Combine these various tidbits with the other elements of the story and you have—When I was in the army we had these odd platoons called Loudspeaker and Leaflet Units. I never ran into one in the flesh but I conceive of this piece as a Loudspeaker and Leaflet Unit in action. Bravely broadcasting and lustily leafleteering.

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INTERVIEWER

You've spoken harshly of *Snow White*'s rococo style and of your admiration for an impoverished kind of writing, but a woman who is impregnated by the moon and produces an emerald-child would not be most people's example of a stripped-away style.

BARTHELME

Of course that's the plot, which is quite solidly rooted in anthropology, nothing in it unknown to anthropology. The style is another matter. If you look at it you'll see that the actual writing is rather bare-bones. Glittering with poverty.

INTERVIEWER

I've always thought of the moon as female.

BARTHELME

The emerald raises the same objection. The mother correctly states that in some cultures it's been seen as female, in some cultures as male. Moll is a poor witch, a witch in reduced circumstances. She says of one of her spells that it can't even put a shine on a pair of shoes. She speaks of the scrabble for existence. Magic has been devalued, hardly exists. The reliquary that's at issue in the piece, which contains the Foot of Mary Magdalene, has barely enough efficacy as a magical object to resolve the plot, in the end. And this general paucity is reflected, I think, in the language.

INTERVIEWER

When you wrote "A Shower of Gold" did you intend to satirize the new values as represented by all these philosophy-prone people?

BARTHELME

Not philosophy-prone but jargon-prone. Around the time that was written, a debased Sartrean language was on every lip. This was a long time ago, almost two decades ago. Peterson's barber in the story has written four books called *The Decision*

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To Be and the television people are all babbling madly about authenticity. There was a huge amount of this kind of thing collecting in the air conditioning vents, the elephants were throwing it in the air and taking baths in it. . . . The piece was not about values but about language. You could do the same story today and substitute the current vocabulary and very little of the structure of the story would have to be changed. Call it "The Lacanthrope."

INTERVIEWER

Aside from furnishing you with curiosities of jargon, has any type of criticism or any individual critic ever warned you away from a fault or aided your work?

BARTHELME

Yes. Diane Johnson, in the course of an extremely kind review of *Great Days*, said that the book had this, that, and *no pictures*. I had done a number of pieces combining text with collages, Max Ernst collages, really, and I hadn't realized that the combination had worn out its welcome so completely. I therefore went back into the closet with the collages. Although sometime I'd like to do an entire collage-novel, as Ernst did, just for the exercise. A Closet Edition.

And many people have pointed out that there are too many jokes, and many people have pointed out that everything is too short. I've been called a miniaturist, a comment I have difficulty enjoying. I read less criticism now, criticism in general, than in days of yore. Gass's essays are invariably stimulating, as are Susan Sontag's. Richard Howard's criticism is very fine, very acute—he knows how things are done, and even more important, what might be done, with good luck.

INTERVIEWER

Asked what aspect of his work had been sadly neglected, Albert Camus answered "humor." What would be your answer?

BARTHELME

I don't think anything's been neglected. There was for a

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long time a dismaying identification with the pop artists which still crops up now and then—made me extremely uncomfortable. That seems to have faded.

There's a degree of confusion among critics about how to deal with "postmodernist" fiction, how to slap a saddle on this rough beast. It's not unprecedented in the history of criticism. I imagine this will continue for a while.

INTERVIEWER

What's it like to be interested in politics and be a writer, in a time when poets make nothing happen? How do you feel about your connection with P.E.N. for instance?

BARTHELME

It's worth the effort, I think. Internationally, P.E.N. attempts to get writers out of jail in cases where they've been put away by the government for political or literary activity, as happens all too often with insecure or insane governments. I remember that when Richard Howard was president of the American center he got two Philippine writers out of jail during his trip to Manila—Madame Marcos handed them over with great ceremony during some kind of bizarre state banquet, drew a curtain and there they were. It's a kind of chipping away at the bad behavior of governments, the same kind of thing Amnesty International does—a consistent effort, year in and year out.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of publishing? Does *Publishers Weekly* raise your pulse rate? Or hackles? What about book reviews? If you wrote reviews, about whom would you like to write?

BARTHELME

Speaking as a member of the raw material, I've been published well, I think, consistently. There's no question but that much of what is published in this country is cotton candy and that this cluttering-up of the bookstores damages writers. To say nothing of what such a diet does to the brain's stomach, if

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you're a reader. But you can't complain about this too much; it's a pluralism that allows R. Crumb and Walter Benjamin and William Gaddis and Julia Child all to live in paperback heaven together. But I'm making a publisher's argument, which is ridiculous. More shame would be salutary.

As to reviewing, I would have liked, had I had the time, to have written appreciations of Thomas Bernhard's *Correction* or Max Frisch's *Man in the Holocene* or one of Ashbery's books—I would have learned something in the process.

INTERVIEWER

In Academe the conventional thing is to point to Ashbery's attention from the media and the awards he has won and to treat this as evidence that poetry has fallen on evil days, that criticism has no standards, and that nobody knows what's happening.

BARTHELME

Ashbery would be damned difficult to get hold of, if you were a critic. The awards and so on are a sign that people understand that he's doing something important, even if they don't understand precisely what. The first time I read "The Waste Land," when I was a pup, I hadn't the faintest idea of what I had in front of me but still said "Zounds!" or whatever. I think Eliot himself wrote about being overtaken by something before you understood it. Also, there's a peculiar negative reaction to the celebrated that's ordinary as beans, to be expected.

INTERVIEWER

Presumably a scholar gives the same care to a scholarly article about you that you give to a piece, because that's his metier.

BARTHELME

Peter Yates, the music critic, said that the proper work of the critic is praise, and that that which cannot be praised should be surrounded with a tasteful, well-thought-out silence. I like that.

—J.D. O'Hara

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Gifts

Stephen Dixon

I wrote a novel for Sarah and sent it to her. She wrote back, "For me? How sweet. Nobody has ever done anything or presented me with anything near to what you've just given me. I'll treasure it always. I must confess I might not get around to reading it immediately, since I am tied up to my neck and beyond with things I'm forced to do first. But I can't describe my pleasure in receiving this and the overwhelming gratitude I'll aways have in knowing it was written especially for me."

I painted a series of paintings and crated and shipped them to her and she wrote back, "Are these really all for me? I only looked in one of them and it said 'First of a series of fifteen' and I counted the other crates and came up with fourteen more and thought, 'My god, I have the entire series.' You cannot imagine how this gift moves me. I'll open the rest of the crates as soon as I find the time, as I have been unrelievedly busy these past few days and will be for weeks. The one I did open I'll hang above my fireplace if I can find the space among all my previous paintings and prints. Meanwhile, it's safely tucked away in a

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closet, so don't fear it will get hurt. Again, what can I say but eternal thanks."

I wrote a sonata for her and called it "The Sarah Piece" and had it printed and sent her a copy and she wrote me, "A musical composition in my name? And for the one instrument I can play, if not well, then at least semipublicly okay? You've gone out of your way to honor and please me more than anyone has and a lot more than any person should expect another to for whatever the reasons, and as soon as I can sever myself from all the other things I'm doing and which I wish I had the time to tell you about, I will sit down and try and learn this sonata or at least read it through. You cannot believe the many good things that have been happening to me lately and which I'm so involved in, but I will definitely find the time to attend to my sonata in one of the ways I mentioned, of that you can bet. Once more my warmest thanks for your thoughtfulness and my respect for your creativeness, and my very best."

I carved sculptures for her, designed and built furniture for her, potted and baked earthenware for her, wrote poems, plays and essays for her and after I completed each of these projects I sent it to her and her replies were usually the same. Her thanks. I could never know how much this means to her. She is continually amazed by the diversity of my talents and skills. She will read, look at or use this newest thing as soon as she can. Then, after I sent her a coverlet I wove and thought good enough to use as a wall hanging and maybe the best thing I'd ever made, she wrote, "You've sent me so many things that I don't know what to open or look at or hang or put in its rightful place or eat off of first. And not wanting to give any of your creative forms preference over the others, I'm going to set aside one of my dozen rooms for your work and call that room the Arthur T. Reece Retreat in honor of you and put all your gifts in it so I know that whenever I want to go through any of these works or have found a place in one of the other rooms to put one of them or even when I want to think of you creating and making all these things for me, I can enter that room. The room, by the way, has no windows. It does have a wash basin and door, but

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with no lock on it. It is a small room, once the maid's quarters of the previous owners, so most of the things you sent me will have to be piled on top of one another, though know that'll be done extra carefully. I am having the door taken off and the space it makes bricked up. I am cutting that room off from the rest of the house. I am going to set that separated room afire in honor of the great passion you've put into your work and your obvious deep feelings for me. I am honored, I am grateful, I am amazed and touched and of course ever thankful and moved, I have never known anyone more creative and generous than you. No, I am joking. I have given away all your gifts from the start and have told the post office and other delivery services to turn back any further envelope, package or crate coming from you. No, I am joking. I am disassociating myself from all the other men I know and whatever activities I'm now involved in and want you to come live with me immediately as loving soulmates and man, parents and wife. No, I am joking. I never received any of the things you claimed to friends you sent me and am beginning to doubt they all could have gotten lost along the way. No, I am joking. They all arrived but I quickly turned them into garbage. Aside from that, I am happily married, with child for the first time in my life, and wonder why you think you know me well enough to keep sending these things to me without my eventually getting disturbed and insulted by them and where you initially got my address and name. No, I am joking. I appreciate all you've done, have enjoyed the attention, and sold whatever I could of these gifts for whatever I could get for them and with that money I am about to take a trip around the world with my newest lover who is also my best friend and one of our finest progressive artists. No, I am joking. It was nice of you to make all these things for me but I'm sorry to say, almost ashamed to, after all I've said in my previous letters and just put you through, that I wasn't once, and this is the absolute truth now, impressed. When one has it one has it and you've proven over and over again you never had it and will never have it so why bother trying anything out again in any field or form or at least on me? You do,

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and whatever it is you send me I shall throw up on before returning it to you cash on delivery in its envelope, box or crate.''

I sent her a silver necklace someone else made but in my cover letter to her I said I fashioned it with my own homemade tools. She wrote back, ''For the first time, and I'm as serious now as I was at the end of my last letter, I love what you've made for me and think you've adopted a creative form that suits you perfectly and which you serve extraordinarily well. Good luck and success with it and much thanks.'' I sent her more of this person's jewelry and after the first few packages each one came back with a post office message stamped on it saying ''Address Unknown.'' I still send jewelry to her and other things I buy or sometimes find and they always come back. The few friends I know who know her say they also don't know where she's gone. The post office is right, they say. ''Despite how much we all adored her and thought the feeling was mutual, if not more so, from her to some of us, she told no one she was going and left no forwarding address.''

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Paul Celan

Conversation in the Mountains

Translator's Introduction

Paul Celan wrote "Conversation in the Mountains" in August, 1959, shortly after a missed meeting with an unnamed person on a mountain road. What he wrote after that failed rendezvous was a language-parable, mimicking the nineteenth century Romantic quest in which the ascent of mountains becomes a striving for the union of the soul with nature. The landscape of Celan's piece recalls the Alpine terrain of stone, fields, and fir-trees which Buchner's Lenz crosses in the 1837 fragment, but instead of the clamorous daylight of Lenz *we have a world grown dark and silent, where "things have gone down in the west." This is also the landscape of folktale, where plants, flowers and stones may or may not speak to the traveller, where to travel without one's own shadow is to travel in search of a soul.*

There are echoes of at least three different dialogues in Celan's story. We hear Buchner's address to Lenz, the artist at the end of his tether, "burrowing into the universe," but finding himself "in the void." Lenz, too, tries to talk to himself, but cannot, his sentences trailing off into echolalia, madness, and silence.

Buchner to Lenz: Celan to Osip Mandelstam, his older "cousin" and predecessor, who struggled himself with silence and extinction. Mandelstam, like Celan, was preoccupied with finding a language for the "here and now," a language where green, the color of time, of both growth and decay, might meet with white, the color of the absolute, the pure, eternal, unchanging word. (In Mandelstam's memoir-fable, The Noise of Time, *he refers to the Jews of St. Petersburg, dispossessed of their own language, as "tongue-tied," as "babblers.")*

Celan to Celan: Celan, the German poet, writing in cultural

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exile in Paris, addresses Celan the Jew. Celan the Jew is a survivor, writing in a language "borrowed not lent," the language of the other, conversing over his shoulder with No One, his "Do you hear" answered by an echo. But in this dialogue between the opposing selves, there is a progression, beginning with an inarticulate stammer, then proceeding through paradox, indirection, and the evocation of images from Celan's poetic lexicon: stone, star, veil, thread, and Sabbath candle—to fluency. The act of writing poetry, that is, in Celan's bleak metaphor, the stutter of a blindman's stick on stone, is nonetheless a redemptive solution to the language riddle, a way up, a way into the self.

—Katharine Washburn

One evening, after the sun (and not only the sun) had gone down in the west, the Jew went for a walk, that is to say he stepped out of his hut and went for a walk, the Jew, the son of a Jew, and his name went with him, his unspeakable name, as he walked and went on and went shuffling along, you could hear it, going with stick, going on stone, now can you hear me, hear me you shall, here am I, I, I and that one whom you hear, whom you just think you hear, I and the other—he walked and made himself heard, walked out one evening when all sorts of things had gone down in the west, went on under the cloud-mass, went on in shadow, his own and the other's—for the Jew, you know, what does he have that he really owns that's neither borrowed nor lent and never returned—and there he walked and went on his way, went along the road, the beautiful road, the incomparable road, he went on like Lenz through the mountains, he to whom it was granted to live down there in the lowlands where he belongs, he went on and on.

Ah yes, he went on down the road, the beautiful road.

And who do you think came toward him? His cousin, his cousin, his own first cousin came toward him, he was older by a quarter of a Jew's lifetime, he was tall, he came toward him, he

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went on, he too in shadow, that which was borrowed—for who, I ask and ask once more, when God has made him a Jew, comes along with his very own things?—he came, he was tall, he came toward the other, Tall came to Small, the Jew bid his stick be still before the stick of Jew Tall.

Even stone too was still, and there was a stillness in the mountains where they went, he and the other.

So it was silent indeed, it was silent up there in the mountains. Not silent for long, for if a Jew comes along and encounters another one, then silence is soon done for, even in the mountains. For a Jew and nature, those are once and for all two quite different things, even here, even now.

And so there they stand, the first cousins, and on the left the Turk's-cap lily is growing, it grows wild, it grows as it does nowhere else, and there on the right, there's Lamb's Lettuce and *Dianthus superbus*, the gilly flower, is not far away. But they, the first cousins, they have (it cries out to heaven) no eyes. As a matter of fact, they have eyes, even they, but there's a veil before them, not in front, no, but in back, a detachable veil: an image barely enters before it gets caught in the web and soon there's a thread which winds itself and entwines itself around the image, a thread from the veil; it winds itself around the image and gets it with child, half-image, half-veil.

Poor Turk's-cap, poor Lamb's Lettuce. There they stand, the first cousins, they stand on a road in the mountains, silent stick and silent stone, the silence no silence at all, no word has grown dumb here, no sentence, it's just a pause, just a hiatus, an empty space, you can see the syllables standing around; they're tongue and mouth, those two, as they were before, and there's a veil on their eyes, and you, you poor things, you neither stand there nor do you bloom, you don't exist. July is not July is not July.

Those babblers! Even now, tongues tied and lips sealed tight, they have something to say! Well, let them talk...

"You came from far away, came here..."

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"So I did. I came. I came, like you."

"I know that."

"You do know. You know what you see: The earth has folded up here, folded over once, then twice, then three times, and split open in the middle, and in the middle there is water, the water is green, the Green is white and the White comes from still further on high, comes from the glaciers, one could say, but shouldn't, that this is a language for the here and now, the Green with the White within, a language for neither you nor me—for I ask, for whom is it meant, this earth, for I say it is not meant for you or for me—a language, to be sure, without I or Thou, merely He, merely It, do you understand, merely She and nothing more."

"I understand, I do understand. Because I came, ah yes, from afar, ah yes, I came like you."

"I know."

"You know and you want to ask me: And nonetheless you came, nonetheless you came up here—why, and whatever for?"

"Why and whatever for... Perhaps because I had to talk to myself or to you, because I had to talk with mouth and tongue, not only with stick. For to whom does he talk, the stick? He talks to stone, and the stone—to whom does he talk?"

"To whom should he talk, cousin? He doesn't talk, he speaks, and he who speaks, cousin, talks to no one, he speaks because no one hears him, no one and No One and then he, he says, not his mouth or his tongue, he says, and not only he: Do you hear?"

"Do you hear, he says—I know, first cousin, I know... Do you hear, he says, here I am, I am, I am here, I have come. Come with the stick, I and no other, I and not he, I with my hour, appointed not deserved, I who was dealt the blow, I who was not, I with my memory, I, with memory failing, I, I, I..."

"He says, he says... Do you hear, he says... And D'y'hear,

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surely, D'y'hear, he says nothing, he doesn't answer, for D'y'hear, that is the one with the glaciers, the one folded over threefold, but not for mankind . . . The Green-and-White over there, the one with the Turk's-cap, the one with the Lamb's Lettuce . . . But I, cousin, I who just stand, here on this road, here where I don't belong, today, now, since it's gone down in the west, it and its light, I here with the shadow, my own and the other's, I—I who can tell you:

—I was lying on the stone then, you know, on the flagstones; and they lay next to me, the others who were like me, the others who were different from me and the same, those first cousins; and they lay there and slept, they slept and slept not, and they dreamt and dreamt not, and they did not love me and I loved them not, for I was one and who would love one, and there were many more still than lay around me, and who'd wish to be able to love all, and I, I will not keep this from you, I did not love them, those who could not love me, I loved the burning candle there on the left in the corner, I loved it because it burned down, not because *it* burned down, for *it* was *his* candle, the candle that he, the father of our mothers had lit, because that evening a day began, a singular one, a day, the seventh day, the seventh upon which the first was bound to follow, the seventh and not the last one, I loved, cousin, not it, I loved its burning down, and do you know, I have not loved anything since;

no, nothing: or perhaps that which burned down like that candle on that day, on the seventh and not the last; not the last, no, for yes, I am here on this road, they say it's beautiful, yes I am, next to the Turk's-cap and the Lamb's Lettuce, and a hundred steps away, over there, within reach, there the larch tree grows right up to the stone-pine, I see it, I see it and don't, and my stick, it spoke to stone, and my stick is silent now, and the stone, it can speak, you say, and in my eyes there's the veil, the detachable one, there are veils, detachable veils, and when you've lifted one, there's a second one too and the star—for now it stands above the mountains—if it wants to come in, it will have to be married, and soon it will no longer be itself, but

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half-veil and half-star, and I know, I know, cousin, I know, I met you here and we talked a great deal, and the folds there, you know, they exist neither for mankind nor for us, who walked and met each other, for us here under the star, for us, the Jews who came like Lenz through the mountains, Thou Tall and I Small, you a babbler and I a babbler, we with our sticks, we with our names, unspeakable names, we with our shadows, our own and the other's, here are you and here am I—

I here, I: I who can tell you all, who could have told you; I who will not tell you and have not told you: I with the Turk's-cap to the left, I with the Lamb's Lettuce, I with the burned-down thing, with the candle, I with the day, I with the days, I now here and I now there, I perhaps accompanied—at last!—by the love of those unloved, I on the way to myself, up here."

Translated from the German by Katharine Washburn and Margaret Guillemin

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What I Did Last Summer

by Betty Eppes

Betty Eppes is a reporter for the Baton Rouge Advocate. *In the spring of 1980 she was a Special Assignments Writer for the "Fun" section which appears in both the* Advocate *and the* State Times, *the morning and afternoon papers respectively. That spring she decided to spend her summer vacation trying to interview J.D. Salinger, the author famous for his reclusive behavior. Her story appeared in the Sunday* Advocate *magazine section on June 29, 1980, and in syndication in a number of other newspapers including the* Boston Globe. *What follows is a far fuller account of her experience which has been arranged from conversations held with Ms. Eppes by G.A.P.*

I decided one day in 1976 that I was so bored that if I hit another tennis ball I was going to go crazy. So I thought, Now wait a minute, there's a small weekly paper in town—the Baton Rouge *Enterprise*—and what if they needed a tennis *colum-*

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Betty Eppes

nist? I was a pretty good tennis player—fluctuating between No. 1 and No. 3 at my tennis club in Baton Rouge, which is the Southwood Tennis Club. I play there because they have a health spa. I work with weights, dead-lifting, squats, bench presses, and all that stuff.

But I had never written a word professionally. In 1974 I tried a novel—more or less a kind of purge—about a woman whose life was parallel to mine. But I had no training to do such a thing; I had not even graduated from high school. I grew up in Trenton, Mississippi, which is a crossroads in Smith County; my father was a dirtfarmer. We were very poor. I married very young and had three babies. I learned my tennis from a friend in Florida. I don't guess there *is* a tennis racket in Trenton, Mississippi. But everything I try I study at incessantly. That's what I did with my writing.

So I wrote six tennis columns for the Baton Rouge *Enterprise*. But they wouldn't publish them. So finally I took the articles to the *Morning Advocate*, which is the major daily in Baton Rouge. They not only published the columns, but after a while they let me do just about anything that was almost a reasonable story. Not only did I do columns on Bjorn Borg, Billie Jean King, and Rod Laver, and why tennis skirts cost so much money, but I went to the New Orleans Saints football camp and did interviews with Hank Stram, and a lot of neat things like that.

It's very important for me to be super-excited about things. I have to feel challenged. Otherwise I get terribly bored and begin wondering if I shouldn't move on to something else. Last summer I started wondering what assignment I could take on for myself that would be challenging and super-exciting. I thought and thought. I told Larry Fisher, who is the owner of the bookstore where I was browsing, that I was thinking —hoping to come up with something really interesting. He

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said he'd think about it too.

A day or so later I happened to be leafing through an encyclopedia of writers. I turned to William Faulkner who is just my idol, my personal *idol*, and there were pages and pages on him. Then by chance, because I had just reread *The Catcher in the Rye* I thought, Well, I'll check out J.D. Salinger, which is what I did. There was one skimpy paragraph.

So I went to Larry Fisher and I said, Damn, Larry, there's nothing at *all* about Salinger. He said that was because nobody knows anything about him. He said, Hey! There's your interview! I said, That's a good idea. I think I'll do it. Larry laughed and said, I think you ought to go and walk on the moon, too!

But the more I thought of it, the more enamored of the idea I became. I thought, Damn, I'm going to go for it.

Actually I had a small file on J.D. Salinger. I am a very practical woman and I file things I think might come in handy later on. J.D. Salinger and Howard Hughes happened to be the most interesting people I didn't know. Peculiar birds. I had little files on both. In Salinger's file I had a short item clipped out of *Newsweek*, I think, which reported that he shopped in a complex called Cummins Corner in the town of Windsor, Vermont, not far from where he lives in Cornish, New Hampshire. I thought, That's where I'll go to try to find him.

So I filed two stories in advance with my editor, Jeff Cowart, at the Baton Rouge *Advocate.* I didn't tell him what I was going to do. I knew he would have said, Eppes, people have been trying to get an interview with Salinger for twenty-seven years; forget it, and go on out there and meet your next deadline. Well, I didn't want to hear that. So I just bought an airline ticket to Manchester, New Hampshire.

Now, as I say, I'm a very practical woman. I'd checked everything out and discovered the whole trip was going to cost $1000. I thought, Jesus God, Eppes, that's a lot of money to throw away. So I cast around in my mind for another person in that area I could get an interview with in order to pay off some of the expenses. The only person I could think of was William Loeb, the publisher of the *Manchester Leader.* He's not one of my most favorite people. He is just about the most outspoken

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conservative man there ever was, making all sorts of crazy noises, a wild man, but on the other hand I didn't want to eat $1000. So I called up his secretary to arrange for an interview. She said it would be fine. So I hopped on the plane and flew on up to Manchester. I spent the first night in Manchester asking the populace what it felt about Bill Loeb. I wanted to get some background. I interviewed fifty-seven people. Ten out of the fifty-seven didn't like Bill Loeb.

He was ill-at-ease answering questions, it seemed to me. But there was no doubt about his attitudes. Once, when I referred to his conservatism, he interrupted me and gave me to understand that he thought of himself not as a conservative but a red-blooded American. He said that if I cared anything about my country I should go back to Louisiana and campaign hard for a Ronald Reagan presidency. His office was full of American flags. A big one stood in the corner. You would have thought he was a member of the House of Representatives. He had a lot of little flags on his desk. He had one in his lapel. Certainly he was very generous with his time. He invited me to a banquet at which he gave an award to the bravest man in New Hampshire who was somebody who had jumped into a river to save a child. Mr. Loeb gave him a plaque. Afterwards, he let me sit in on the open meeting at which anybody could come in and grill him on his policies. Of course, he has the option of skipping the questions but I didn't see him do it. He allows them to grill the hell out of him: *What kind of newspaper you running?*—very sarcastic and needling.

After I had done with William Loeb, I rented a sky-blue Pinto and headed into the Green Mountains to look for J.D. Salinger. I've never driven in the mountains—and there I was, hauling my ass around those strange hills in a sky-blue Pinto that could barely make it over the peaks!

On my way to Windsor I stopped in Claremont, New Hampshire, to visit the offices of the *Claremont Eagle*. In my Salinger file at home I had a clipping about a Windsor schoolgirl named Shirlie Blaney who had managed to get an interview with Salinger for the student issue of the *Claremont Eagle* back in 1953. She had seen him eating in a local res-

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taurant and had walked up and simply asked him. He had said OK and he had given her—at least as far as I knew—the only interview he had ever granted. There had been such a rumpus about this interview—I mean the little girl suddenly found herself in correspondence with people all over the country—that it reinforced Salinger's determination never to give interviews again.

I thought I should read the Blaney interview at least to prepare myself. A fellow who works for the *Eagle* named Jefferson Thomas of all names (he said he had a terrible time in the Army where he had to give his last name first) helped me look for it back in the files. He was very helpful. It turned out he and I share the same birthday. It took us 2½ hours to find the story which I read into my tape recorder.

I also dropped into the bookstore in Claremont. It's a small bookstore but being the only one in that area Salinger comes over from Cornish and visits it on occasion. I talked with the owner of the store about him. She said, He's such a peculiar man, not like any customer you ever saw. He'll come in and doesn't want you to speak even. If you ask if he needs help, he just shakes his head and walks away. . . . One day my little girl was here with me when he came in. She was so delighted. She got a copy of a book of his and went over and asked for his autograph. Then he turned on his heel and walked out. He is a very peculiar man.

I stayed in Windsor, Vermont, at the Windsor Motel. Salinger lives in Cornish, of course, across the Connecticut River in New Hampshire, which is just the smallest kind of hamlet. Windsor is the nearest place that has lodgings. The motel there looked like an old-time motor court from twenty years ago—very primitive, no phones in the room, but it's set in a beautiful rural area amongst all those hills. Windsor itself is about seven miles away.

In my room that night I spent some time listening to the Blaney interview and preparing my questions, writing one on top of each page of my little spiral notebook. In that interview Salinger had mentioned that Holden Caulfield was autobiographical and that it had been a great relief telling people

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about his own early life. I thought I'd ask him about that, and if he planned a sequel to *The Catcher in the Rye.* He had talked to Blaney about wanting to go to Indonesia. I wondered if he had ever gotten there, and what he remembered about entertaining troops aboard ship, which he had done in the West Indies. I thought I'd ask him about the American Dream. I had about twenty-odd questions in my notebook when I'd finished.

The next morning it was cold. An arctic front had come through that night and there was ice in the swimming pool next to the motel. Here it was in the middle of June and I was wearing the normal clothes you'd wear in Baton Rouge in the summer. Luckily, I'd thrown a long-sleeved sweater in my bag. If it hadn't been for that sweater I would have froze my ass off.

I drove to Windsor. It is a small country town—everything concentrated on Maine Street with Bridge Street crossing it and leading down to the covered bridge over the Connecticut River. The first thing I did was to go into the drugstore. I told the man behind the counter that I was interested in interviewing J.D. Salinger. He looked at me and said, You're a journalist. Go away. He wouldn't say another word. And I thought, Oh God, here it was, the first time I'd mentioned his name, and it was like a door had been slammed on me. I couldn't afford too many more of *those.* So I went back out in the street.

The Cummins Corner I had read about in the news story in my Salinger file turned out to be a bunch of shops in a big old wooden, sprawling building—a grocery store, a liquor store, a barber shop, and an ice cream parlor, though needless to say no one was hurrying in to buy ice cream *that* morning.

I went into the grocery in Cummins Corner and told the man behind the counter that I had read in a story that J.D. Salinger often came in there. He looked puzzled and said, No. He didn't think so. But he was polite. He wasn't like the guy in the drugstore. In fact, this guy didn't really know who J.D. Salinger *was.* I said, Think. Really think hard.

So he did, and after a while he said, Well, that name does sort of ring a bell. I have this really strange customer who comes in once a week to do some shopping. As a matter of fact, this

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guy has an unlisted phone number—and that's a little freaky in these parts. He said he had the number on file because this guy was a customer.

So he pulled out the number, and sure enough on the card it had J.D. Salinger. I thought, Ah *hah*! I didn't ask for the number, because I was sure he wouldn't give it to me, but I asked if he would call the number *for* me. He said he would. He called the number and then handed me the phone. It was J.D. Salinger's housekeeper! I told her who I was and that I would like to see Mr. Salinger. She got very nervous and said that she shouldn't be talking to me. She said Mr. Salinger doesn't want to *talk* to anybody, he doesn't want to *see* anybody, he doesn't want to be *bothered*. If she helped me, she said she'd get in big trouble. I tried to reassure her. I said, Honey, you don't have to help me; just tell me how I can get to see Mr. Salinger. She was so nervous by this time she could barely talk. She said that I should write him a note and post it. I moaned. I said it could be a *week* before he ever saw it. She went on to suggest that if I handed the note to the girl in the Windsor post office, Mr. Salinger would get it. She must have been very relieved when I thanked her and hung up.

Well, then I bought myself a Mead's Spiral Notebook with a blue cover in which to compose this letter to J.D. Salinger. I thought it would be tacky to send him a note from my own reporter's notebook which is so small that I would have used up five or ten pages just to tell him I wanted to see him. I bought a Bic ballpoint pen for nineteen cents. I took the notebook out on the street and since there are no benches in Windsor I sat down on the curbstone to do the letter. I thought, Oh God! What do you say to J.D. Salinger? Good *night*! I mean he gets tons and tons of requests—what would make him answer mine?

I started off by telling him who I was, and that I earned my living by writing. I did not mention *The Catcher in the Rye* or any of his work at all. It's true I reread *The Catcher in the Rye* twice a year, but Salinger isn't one of my favorite writers—I can't really identify with the characters. What had fascinated me was that as a girl in Smith County, Mississippi, where males

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and females are very secluded from one another, I had two older brothers, and reading *The Catcher in the Rye* was like opening a secret door into their private male world. I really learned from it and I can certainly recognize the man's literary skills. Of course, I didn't say any of this in the letter. I told him I wasn't a girl who had come to usurp any of his privacy; I was a woman who supported herself through writing and would very much like to see him. I wanted to know if he was still writing. I told him I was a novelist. I told him writing was so hard.

Then I explained that I was staying at the Windsor Motel where there were no phones in the rooms. Since he could not reach me, I wrote him that I would come back to Cummins Corner at 9:30 the next morning and wait for thirty minutes. If he didn't come, I would be there at 9:30 the *next* morning to wait for thirty minutes. . . and I told him if he didn't come then I was going back to Baton Rouge because I couldn't afford to stay in Windsor any longer.

I told him that I would be sitting in a sky-blue Pinto right by the corner and just up the road from the covered bridge and that I was tall with green eyes and red-gold hair. I finished the letter, "I will make no further effort to seek you out, not because of guard dogs or fences, but because I do not want to anger you or cause you grief." Then I put a PS down at the bottom: "I see perfectly why you live in this area. Its beauty is awesome. Often I find myself whispering."

I took the letter into the post office and said I had a letter for J.D. Salinger. I got a pretty peculiar look as I handed it over. The people in Windsor seemed so determined to protect him. God *bless*!

After I'd done that, I went and brought some extra batteries for my tape recorder. I was being very cautious. After all, it was so cold the batteries I brought with me could have been affected and malfunctioned. It was best not to leave anything to chance.

Then I bought an eight-pack of Tab. It's my favorite drink. I drink Tab like most people drink booze: I really *swill* it down. I took the Tab back to the Windsor Motel and there I fell apart. It was interesting. Up to that point I had been very confident. I

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remembered how nice Salinger was to the women he wrote about in his stories and books. Sometimes he was very rough on the men, but he was gentle with females. Holden is so very tender to his sister in *The Catcher in the Rye*. It was going to be a piece of cake. But then in my motel room I began thinking of all the reasons for J.D. Salinger *not* to come. I really got panicky. I hate to fail. I tried to think of things to encourage myself—that Edmund Hillary had climbed Mt. Everest the same year that *The Catcher in the Rye* came out. It didn't work. I got so upset that I began swearing and pacing and worrying and trying to calm myself by drinking Tab and finally I said to myself, Oh well! and I went and pigged out on some fresh fruit. I eat fruit like I drink Tab.

In the middle of the night I woke up and I *knew* J.D. Salinger was going to come. I just knew. I was so excited that I had to say to myself, Now Betty Eppes, calm down. I have these *things*. I always know when something really important is going to happen. I always have them when people are dying. They just come to me like revelations.

I got up at four in the morning and turned on the TV. All hell had broken loose in the environment. Mt. St. Helens had erupted. On the TV preachers were wailing about Hell and damnation and destruction. But I remember thinking that only some natural catastrophe like that was going to keep me from my interview with J.D. Salinger. I was really confident. At breakfast I left a five dollar tip. I *knew* he was going to turn up.

I drove up to Cummins Corner in my Pinto. I bought a Tab there. Then I positioned myself in the Pinto about fifty yards from the covered bridge that crosses the Connecticut. I knew Salinger would have to cross that bridge to come into Windsor. One great piece of luck was that the bridge was being repaired. People parked their cars in a parking area on the New Hampshire side and then walked across. I knew Salinger would have to appear on foot. So I checked the camera and got it ready for an approach shot. I aimed it towards the covered bridge. I got the tape recorder out and set it up. I knew that Salinger would be spooked by the sight of a tape recorder, but also that it would be crazy to try to talk to him scribbling away in his

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face. So I thought *Hell,* I'll stuff the tape recorder down my blouse under my long-sleeved sweater. It was difficult to do without looking like I had some kind of deformity. I thought, Jeez—I wouldn't want J.D. Salinger to think I've got a square boob. So I finally shoveled the tape recorder down the sleeve of my blouse right under my armpit where I could hold it in against my body with my arm. I thought, if I just keep my elbow in, everything will be cool.

It seemed like I had waited there in the Pinto for about three years. I was just beginning to read an article in that morning's Boston *Globe* entitled "What Is Luck?" when right on time—nine-thirty—he stepped out from the black of that covered bridge. . .J.D. Salinger!

He didn't look like I thought he would. He had white hair. That freaked me out. He came out of the dark and the sun lit his hair like a beacon. In all the pictures I had seen of him he had dark hair. I was not looking for a Holden Caulfield but I was probably *thinking* of a Holden Caulfield. Not only that, but I was surprised by the intensity of the man. He walked almost like he was driven or pursued, his shoulders hunched up around his ears. . .it was almost a *run.* He looked neither right nor left but in my direction. As soon as I saw him coming I fumbled under my blouse to turn on the tape recorder and I opened the door and got out of the Pinto. He kept coming towards me. He had an attaché case stuck under his arm. He

The covered bridge at Windsor, Vt., through which Betty Eppes hoped J.D. Salinger would appear.

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walked right up to me and said "Betty Eppes?" which meant, of course, he had seen or had news of my letter. He mispronounced my name. "Eppès," he said. We shook hands standing beside the Pinto. He had on a pair of jeans, sneakers, and one of those shirt-jackets. He looked in remarkable shape—very slim, very healthy. After he shook my hand, he backed off a few steps. He's a very tall man so he looked down on me with eyes, very black, that seemed to glitter. I thought, Shit, I have just shaken J.D. Salinger's hand; then I realized that the Sony tape recorder was going to fall out. I could feel it beginning to slip down my side. It was terrible! I clamped my arm in to keep it from going any further. And then I realized I only had 29 minutes of tape to go and when the machine reached the end it would give off a little beep. I thought if that beep signal went off while I was standing in front of J.D. Salinger and he heard it coming out from under my sweater, I'd just fall down in a *faint.* It was terrible! You don't *know* how terrible it was!

He seemed just as nervous as I was. His hands shook. Here was J.D. Salinger and I thought, Shit, the man isn't going to stand still. I mean it was obvious that he didn't want to be there...he was going to bolt any second. Great God! I thought, Now, Eppes, if you don't get but one question in before he bolts, it had better be about Holden Caulfield, because he's the one everybody wants to know about.

First, I thanked Mr. Salinger for coming. He said, I don't know why I did, actually. There's nothing I can tell you. Writing's a very personal thing. So why'd you come here? He said that my letter had been very brief.

I was very nervous. I said, I came not just for myself, Mr. Salinger, but as a *spokesman* for all who want to know if you're still writing.

It was then he must have known—I was a journalist. After all, I was reading the questions off my notebook page, and scribbling notes.

I asked about Caulfield. Please tell me—is he going to grow up? Is there going to be a sequel to *The Catcher in the Rye*? All your readers want to know the answer to that question.

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The whole town was gaping. I mean everybody. The old man in the Cummins Corner office had his nose pressed to the window pane. The people in the laundromat came out and stood on the sidewalk. There were faces looking out of the windows of the apartments across the street.

I kept pegging away about Holden Caulfield. He said, It's all in the book. Read the book again, it's all in there. Holden Caulfield is only a frozen moment in time.

So I asked, Well, does that mean he *isn't* going to grow up—there won't be a sequel?

He said, Read the book.

Every question I asked about Holden Caulfield he replied, Read the book. It's all in the book. There's no more to Holden Caulfield. Over and over. Except when I asked him if the book was autobiographical. When I quoted to him what he had once said in that interview with the Windsor schoolgirl about his boyhood being like Holden's, he seemed to be made very uncomfortable by that. He said, Where did you get all that stuff? He looked at me very hard. I thought he was going to say, Read the book, again, and if he had I would have stomped on his foot! But this time he said, I don't know. . . I don't know. I've just let it all go. I don't know about Holden any more.

So I left off Holden Caulfield and began asking about other things. Christ! I just wanted to ask him a question he would answer. I began turning the pages of my notebook.

Eppes: Have you visited Indonesia?

Salinger: I really don't want to talk about all of this.

Eppes: You told Miss Blaney you were going to London to make a movie. Did you?

Salinger: Where'd you get all this old stuff?

Eppes: Did you make or work on a movie? Will you in the future?

Salinger: Can we go on to something else?

Eppes: Of course. But just for fun, do you remember the name

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of the ship you worked on as an entertainer?

Salinger: I do, yes. *The Kungsholm.*

Eppes: You were in the Counter-Intelligence Corps. How many languages do, or did you, speak?

Salinger: French and German, but not very well. And a few phrases of Polish.

Eppes: Given your family background, why writing?

Salinger: I can't say exactly. I don't know if any writer can. It's different for each person. Writing's a highly personal act. It's different for each writer.

Eppes: Did you consciously opt for a writing career, or did you just drift into it?

Salinger: I don't know. (*A long pause*) I truly don't. I just don't know.

I wanted a Tab. It was so painful for him to answer. But he kept standing there. I hurried on with my questions. I said that I had heard he had done his writing in a special concrete workshop situated behind his house. I asked if he did his writing there.

He said, I have my work area set up the way I like, so its comfortable. But I don't want to discuss it. I don't want people streaming up here trying to climb walls and peek in windows. I'm comfortable, he said, and that's enough.

I asked him if publishing wasn't important.

He said that was an easy question that wouldn't take any time to answer at all. He said he had *no* plans to publish. *Writing* was what was important to him—and to be left alone so that he *could* write. To be left in peace. He couldn't tell me *why* he felt he wanted to be left in peace . . . but that he had felt that way in grade school, at the academy, and before and after military service. And he felt it now, too. Boy! he kept harping on that!

So I asked him why he had ever published anything *at all* if

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he felt so strongly that it disturbed his private life.

He said that he had not foreseen what was going to happen. He said he didn't expect it, and when it did happen, he didn't want it. It meant he couldn't live a normal life. He had to put the roads near his home under patrol. His children suffered. Why couldn't his life be his own?

I asked him if that was so why he had bothered to see me. Why hadn't he stayed up on his mountain? Why hadn't he ignored my letter?

He said, You write. I write. He had come as one writer to another. Then he began asking me about my writing. Had I done a book yet? Goodness me! J.D. Salinger asking Betty Eppes about *her* work!

So I told him I had written a novel and given it to a regional publisher—Southern Publishing—but while the contract was being prepared, the couple who ran the company split up and the manuscript was lost. I only had a copy of the first two-thirds of the book. I told Salinger that I was so upset with myself for not keeping a copy, and with the two of them for losing the work, that I just hadn't had the heart to rewrite that last section.

Salinger nodded and said that publishing was a vicious, vicious thing. He said that so many unforeseen things happen when you publish. He said that I'd probably be happier if I never published. He said there was a certain peace in not publishing.

Then we began talking about autographs. I asked him why he hated to give them. He said he didn't believe in giving autographs. It was a meaningless gesture. He told me never to sign my name for anyone else. It was all right for actors and actresses to sign their names, because all they had to give were their faces and names. But it was different with writers. They had their work to give. Therefore, it was cheap to give autographs. He said, Don't you ever do it! No self-respecting writer should ever do it.

Well, I myself had never really thought much about it. I mean nobody had ever asked me for my autograph before—well, *once*, a little girl did, but she thought I was Jane Fonda. I

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signed "Jane Fonda"—I didn't want to hurt the girl's feelings.

I tried other subjects. I asked about discipline in writing.

He said that discipline was no problem—that you either want to write or you don't.

His style? Well, he said he didn't know much about his writing style. Obviously a writer had to make choices. Decisions. But he really couldn't help me with that question.

So I tried politics.

He said, I don't care about politicians. I don't have anything in common with them. They try to limit our horizons; I try to expand our horizons. He said that not one politician stood out in his mind.

I tried economics—inflation, unemployment, energy. . . did he have any comments to make about *these* issues.

No. He said that none of this touched him personally. Not his area. He didn't know much about these things.

That was becoming such a stock answer—that he didn't know. It made me super-nervous. He was super-nervous, too. He kept moving that attaché case around, sticking it out in front of him and then tucking it under his arm.

Then we had this exchange:

Eppes: I've heard you're into organic foods. Do you feel eating food stuffs organically grown is that important?

Salinger: Yes, or I wouldn't bother.

Eppes: Is it true that you'll eat fried foods only if they're prepared in cold-pressed peanut oil?

Salinger: Yes.

Eppes: Why is that?

Salinger: Are you informed on the differences between cold-pressed oil as opposed to oil extracted by other methods.?

Eppes: Yes, I am. I don't use peanut oil but only cold-pressed oils. I make all my salad dressing from cold-pressed apricot kernel, sesame seed, sunflower seed oil. With a few herbs thrown in you come up with a super salad.

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I didn't know how many people would be interested in Salinger on cooking oils, so I went back to something more general. I threw him my question about the American Dream. Did he believe in it?

He said, My own version of it, yes.

When I asked if he would elaborate, he said, I wouldn't care to, no.

So I said that the Constitution seemed to have been written by men for men and that it may not have been intended for women. That produced quite a response!

Salinger: Don't you accept that! Don't ever listen to that. Who says you don't have a right to the American Dream, who says? That's frightful. Awful! Don't you accept that. The American Dream is for *all* Americans. Women are Americans too. It is for you too. Proceed. Claim it if you want it. . . .

After a while, I got to wondering if Salinger was going to bring a halt to this, which was OK by me, because the tape recorder was getting pretty close to the end where the beep was going to go off. I couldn't look at my watch to find out how much time there was left because if I had lifted my arm to look, that damn tape recorder would have slid right down, and I would have died! If Salinger knew what I was going through he might have smiled.

As it was, he smiled twice. The first time was when in the middle of our conversation—I don't know if it was frustration, or intimidation, or awe, or what—tears began to roll down my face. . . . God, it was embarrassing! And I couldn't wipe them away—I had this friggy pencil in one hand and I couldn't move the other arm because it had the tape recorder wedged in under it. Salinger smiled sympathetically at this point; he reached across and wiped those tears off with a knuckle, and then wiped his knuckles on his jeans.

The second time he smiled was when I asked him if he really was writing every day what then was he working on? He smiled and said, I can't tell you that. I kind of understood what he meant.

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Finally Salinger went off to get his mail. I went into Cummins Corner to get an 8-pack of Tab. I must have stayed in there for about ten minutes. As I came out of Cummins Corner I saw Salinger coming back along the street from the post office. I jumped in the Pinto, changed tapes and shoved the tape recorder back down my blouse,turned it on, and then I grabbed my camera and took three pictures of Salinger, who had been stopped by the young owner of Cummins Corner market; the guy had come out and put his hand on Salinger's arm. Apparently he wanted to shake Salinger's hand. That made Salinger furious. He came stalking across the street to the Pinto and leaning in the window right in my face he really got on my case! He chewed my ass *out*! He was wearing his glasses this time. His eyes seemed much larger behind them.

Here's what he said: Because of you, this man I don't know, have never even met, has spoken to me. Just walked up to me on the street over there and *spoke to me*. Just like that. Walked up and put his hand on my arm and *spoke to me*. I don't like that. There have been calls to my neighbors because of you and I don't like my neighbors inconvenienced. I want to be left alone, left to my privacy. That's why I moved here. I moved here seeking privacy, a place where I could lead a normal life and write. But people like you pursue me. I don't wish to seem harsh. It's just that I'm a private person. I resent intrusions. I resent questions. I don't want to talk to strangers. I don't

A photo taken by Betty Eppes through the window of her Pinto of an instant which infuriated Salinger—being touched on the arm by the manager of Cummins Corner who asked if he could shake the author's hand.

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particularly like talking to *anybody*. I'm a writer. Write me letters if you wish. But please, don't drop in.

I knew I had nothing to lose at this point. As he began to turn away, I said, I'm sorry you're upset, Mr. Salinger, but please wait. Just a moment more. *May I take a close-up photograph of you?*

He looked horrified. Absolutely not! No!

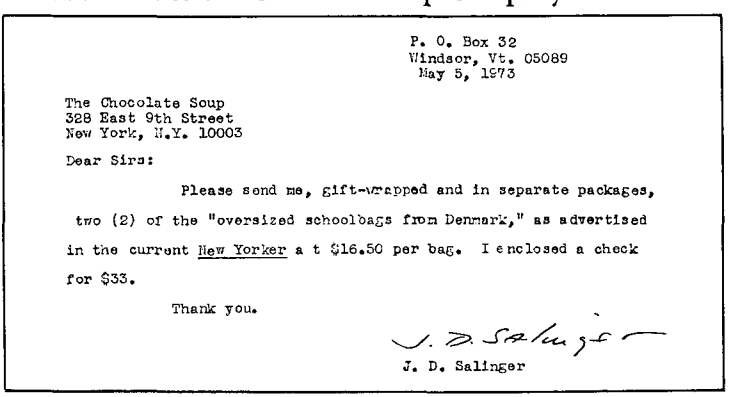
All right, Mr. Salinger, all right. I've put the camera down. It's down, Mr. Salinger, see?

As he paused, I put one more question to him. Tell me honestly, are you really writing?

I thought he'd run, But he answered, I am really writing. I told you. I love to write and I assure you I write regularly. I'm just not publishing. I write for myself. For my own pleasure. I want to be left alone to do it. So leave me alone. Don't drop in here like this again.

Off he went. As he headed for the dark entrance of the covered bridge I snapped a picture. Before I could think of anything else to call after him, he walked back into that bridge and disappeared.

I sent Salinger a copy of the story I wrote for the *Advocate*. Eleven days later I received two photostats—copies of order blanks he had sent away to New York. They were signed by him, mailed in Windsor, and addressed to me care of the *Advocate*. I haven't any idea if he sent them to me. The order was addressed to the Chocolate Soup Company in New York



P. O. Box 32
Windsor, Vt. 05089
May 5, 1973

The Chocolate Soup
328 East 9th Street
New York, N.Y. 10003

Dear Sirs:

Please send me, gift-wrapped and in separate packages, two (2) of the "oversized schoolbags from Denmark," as advertised in the current New Yorker at $16.50 per bag. I enclosed a check for $33.

Thank you.

J. D. Salinger

The curious document signed by J.D. Salinger and received by Betty Eppes eleven days after news of her interview with him was published.

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City and in it Mr. Salinger asked for two oversized schoolbags, gift-wrapped, from Denmark (at $16.50 each) that had been advertised in the then current *New Yorker.* Now why was that sent to me? It drove me just about crazy trying to figure it out.

After the article appeared, there was a lot more spooky little shit like that—just enough to drive you crazy. I have an accordion-file stuffed with job offers, letters, requests... people seemed to come out of the woodwork wanting things from me. There were two motion-picture companies who tried to get me to go back up there to convince Salinger to make a movie! In a way I guess it was a kind of education about what Mr. Salinger had gone through *himself* and what had turned him into the kind of person I found.

I want to tell you that interview with J.D. Salinger was the most difficult one I ever tried. The next most difficult was one I did on Edwin W. Edwards, the former governor of Louisiana, on gambling—stalking him around Las Vegas for three days. But he doesn't compare with J.D. Salinger. Those eyes of Salinger's...the strangest black eyes that glittered and just seemed to gaze right through you. So weird. I mean just weird, weird, weird!

The last photo Betty Eppes took of Salinger...as the author turns for the covered bridge.

This summer I decided to go to England. I interviewed James Mason, the English actor. He was a piece of cake compared to J.D. Salinger. He turned up in a pink sweater. He looked gorgeous. I just wanted to munch on him.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

Andrew Bush is a graduate student in the Department of Comparative Literature at Yale University. He is the author of an essay on Renaldo Arenas and other young Cuban writers and has written several pieces on modern Latin American literature. **Roberto González-Echevarría** was recently the guest editor of the *Latin American Literature Review*'s special issue on Caribbean literature. He is Professor of Spanish and Latin American literature at Yale. His *Pilgrim at Home* is the first and only critical book on the work of Alejo Cartentier.

Stephen Dixon's first novel, *Work*, was published in 1977 by Street Fiction Press. His second novel, *Too Late*, came out with Harper & Row the following year. His first published short story appeared in the *Paris Review* in 1963 (#29); since then, his short stories have appeared in both the O. Henry and Pushcart Prize series as well as in various other magazines.

Tama Janowitz's first novel, *American Dad*, was published this past spring by Putnam's. She has recently completed her second novel, *A Cannibal in Manhattan*, and has stories soon to appear in *Agni* and the *Mississippi Review*. She is living in New York while on leave from the Yale Drama School.

Hans Koning is a New York novelist returned to this country after eight years in England. He is the author of *The Affair*, *A Walk with Love and Death*, and *The Petersburg-Cannes Express*. *The Kleber Avenue Communion* is part of the motif of his new novel *The Kleber Flight*, which will be published this October by Atheneum.

POETRY

Frank Bidart, who teaches at Wellesley College, has published two books of poems, *Golden State* (Braziller) and *The Book of the Body* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). The prose passages in the prize-winning "The War of Vaslav Nijinsky" are based on writings of Romola Nijinsky, Richard Buckle, Serge Lifar and Maurice Sandoz. The quotations from Romola Nijinsky (*Nijinsky*, 1934) are reproduced by permission of Simon and Schuster.

Paul Celan, widely considered one of the most important post-war German poets, died in Paris in 1970. **Katharine Washburn** is a writer and translator who lives in New York City. **Margaret Guillemin** is a lecturer in the German Department at Harvard University. Washburn and Guillemin have recently completed a translation of Theodore Fontane's novel, *L'Adultera*.

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Carol Conroy's book, *The Jewish Furrier and Other Poems*, will be published by the Old New York Book Shop Press in Atlanta later this year. She lives in Minneapolis.
Jonathan Galassi is an editor at Random House and is the Poetry Editor of the *Paris Review*.
Reginald Gibbons has recently been named editor of the *Tri-Quarterly Review*. His second collection of poems will appear in the Houghton Mifflin New Poetry Series early next year.
Heather McHugh's second collection, *A World of Difference*, will be published by Houghton Mifflin in 1981. Her first book was *Dangers* (1977). She teaches at S.U.N.Y./Binghamton.
Joyce Carol Oates's most recent book is *Bellefleur* (Dutton). She teaches at Princeton University. Following a trip to Europe earlier this year, she began work on stories and poems about the Berlin Wall.
Robert Pinsky has been teaching this year at Berkeley. His latest book of poetry is *An Explanation of America* (Princeton). His first book was *Sadness and Happiness*. He has also written a book of criticism, *The Situation of Poetry*.
Gerald Stern will publish *The Red Coal* with Houghton Mifflin this year. His first book, *Lucky Life*, won the Lamont Prize in 1977. He lives in Easton, Pennsylvania.
Charles Wright's fifth book of poems, *The Southern Cross*, will be published by Random House this fall. His translation of Eugenio Montale's *The Storm and Other Poems* won the PEN Translation Prize for 1979.
Paul Zweig's noted books, *The Adventurer* and *The Heresy of Self-Love*, have recently been republished. He is working on a new collection of poems and on a book about Walt Whitman. He teaches at Queens College.

INTERVIEW

J.D. O'Hara teaches English at the University of Connecticut.
Elizabeth Spires's first book of poems, *Globe*, has just been published by Wesleyan University Press. She is also the author of a book for children, *The Falling Star* (Charles Merrill Publishing). She lives in Baltimore and will be teaching this coming year at Loyola College.

ART

Robert Zakanitch was born in Elizabeth, New Jersey, in 1935 and currently lives in New York. His paintings have been included in the 39th Venice Biennale, Italy, and the 1981 Biennial Exhibition at the Whitney Museum, New York; and in one-man exhibitions at the Robert Miller Gallery, New York, and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia.

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Vernon Fisher was born in Fort Worth in 1943 and lives in Denton, Texas. His narrative works combine painting, drawing, photography, and text, and have been presented in recent exhibitions at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, the Guggenheim Museum, New York, and the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, D.C.

Steve Gianakos was born in 1938 and lives in New York. His paintings and watercolors have been exhibited at Droll/Kolbert Gallery, New York, the Guggenheim Museum, New York, and the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, D.C. A book of drawings will be published by Z Press in October.

FEATURE

Betty Eppes [aside from the literary activities described in a foreword to her article "What I Did Last Summer"] is a rural Mississippian, a high school dropout, mother of three, divorced, a tennis player and columnist ("Writing is a compulsion and tennis is my vehicle"), an ex-insurance agent, a former Playboy Bunny, and a collector of stuffed animals.

ERRATUM

The Paris Review wishes to correct the following errors which appeared in issue #79. In the poem "Medicine Bow" by John Logan, "sunmit" should be "summit"; and in Mr. Logan's contributor's note, both his new books were incorrectly titled. They are correctly named "Only the Dreamer Can Change the Dream" and "The Bridge of Change". *The Paris Review* regrets these oversights.

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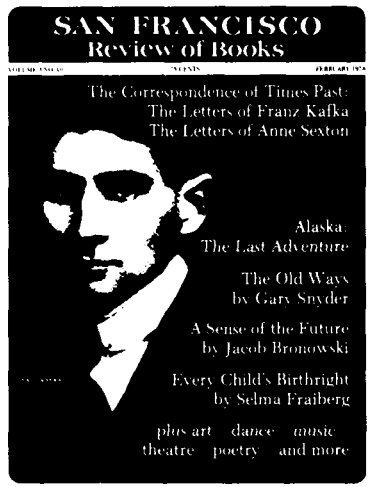

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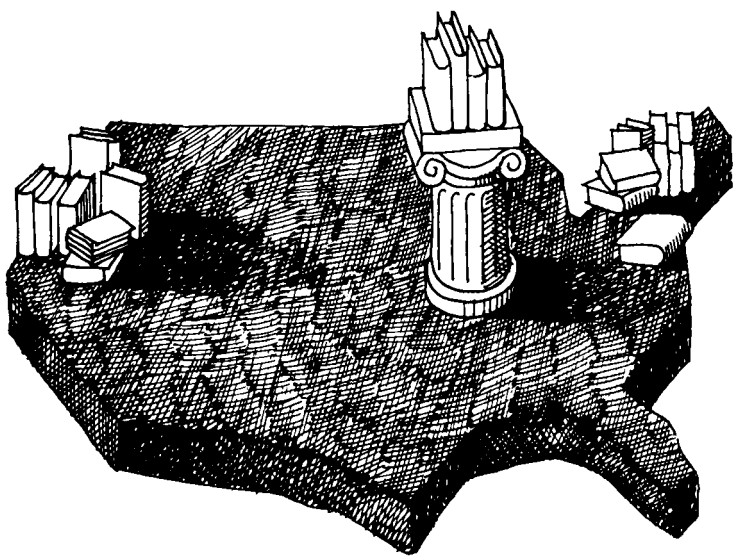

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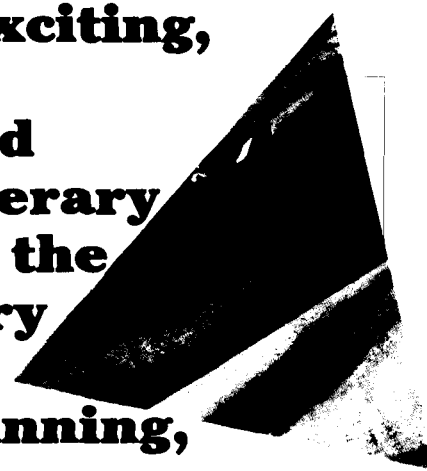

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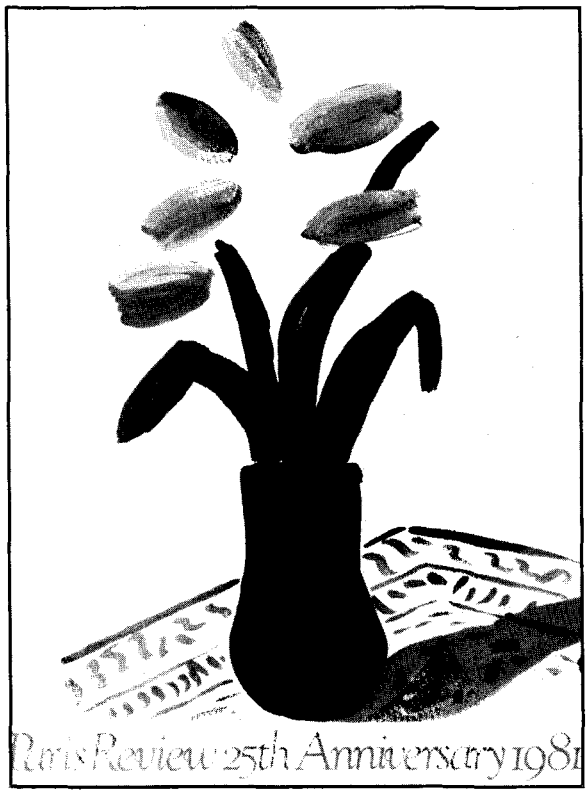

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